PORTFOLIO

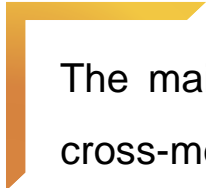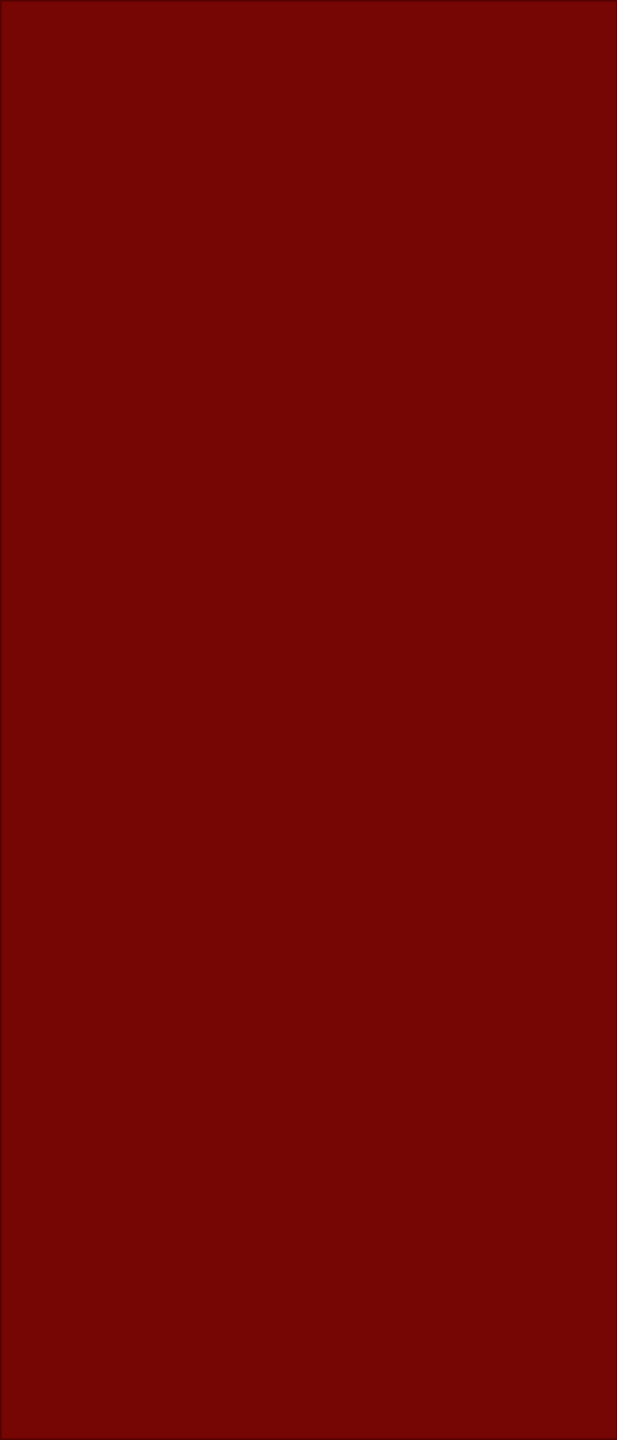## CROSS-MEDIA AESTHETICS AND STORYTELLING ANALYSIS
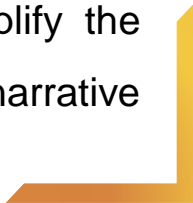
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Introduction

The present portfolio offers a compilation of four analyses, each of them focusing on a specific media object that exemplifies the studied concept, as well as a contrasting example to highlight the properties of the first.

All the concepts are related to the general topic of Aesthetics and Storytelling in Cross-Media. As such, the examples involve media objects whose properties encompass different distribution formats and different ways of consumption. The present portfolio includes analyses of…

- **World-building i**n the cross-media relations around the videogame "League of Legends".
- **Narrative complexity** in the TV show "Ozark" including the techniques used to create such complexity.
- **Interactivity** and fiction using the RPG game "Skyrim" as an example.
- **Docu-fiction**, its formal elements and its relation to truthfulness and reality, taking as an example the mockumentary "Forgotten Silver".

The main findings of the analysis involve a certain pattern of cross-media phenomenon. In all cases, the storytelling techniques share certain similitudes in how they create properties applicable to different media cases. For instance, creating a world, creating suspense or creating a fictionized reality. They reach the same endpoint; however, these techniques are used differently in each case. Each media object treats the analyzed properties with a different recipe; for instance, interactive fiction is never the same with two different examples. Every videogame, TV show, film product or any other text contains multiple nuances while, at the same time, conforming connections that allow for patterns to emerge. This analysis focuses on these patterns and on how they exist within specific media objects; in extension, how they exemplify the concepts of world-building, interactive fiction, narrative complexity, and docu-drama hybrid respectively.

Analysis of World-Building:
League of Legends

League of Legends is a computer game produced by the company Riot Games and released in 2009. It is categorized as an e-sport because of its competitive aspect, and a massive online multiplayer game because of the large number of people involved in it –millions of players consume this media object every day (Ferrari 2013). The game consists of five players trying to conquer the area or "nexus" protected by the other five enemies. To do that, each player can choose a specific "champion" out of the more than 150 available, each of them with their own background stories in the fictional world of "Runaterra".

Image 1: poster of League of Legends

This analysis is focused, though, on the world-building aspect of the game; not only the 'physical' world on which the story of the characters is set, but also the whole culture and community built around the game itself. Interestingly, the storyline that presents the fictional world of League of Legends has no presence in the gameplay. The users play on a specific map that is always the same closed arena, a symmetrical terrain with intuitive shape and rules – reason why the game is also categorized as a MOBA or Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (Ferrari 2013).

The fictional world on which the game is based, "Runaterra", is constructed through the fictional storylines of each character, or 'lore'. Its geography is then presented externally to the game itself, through character descriptions, fandoms, websites to provide information about the game, and supporting media formats

The World(s) of League of Legends

Notably, world-building in League of Legends does not only refer to the actual fictional world of Runaterra. The community of players has participated, during the time that the game has been existing, in an imaginative play contributing to the creation of a framework of great complexity (Ferrari 2013). The behavior of players, the establishment of conventions that complement the game rules, and the competitive culture around it have formed a collective practice culture around League of Legends (Ferrari 2013). As such, the different signifiers of meaning-making transcend the game and enter people's reality; the game becomes a –sometimes important- part of their lives. For instance, users may adopt expressions created in the game as everyday language.

Image 2: one of the League of Legends live events

Take, as another example, the world tournaments organized every year in big events with players from around the globe, carrying great expectation and fascination (Image 2). Certainly, something we can call a world, if not one that would be represented in a physical map.

Introduction of the World of League of Legends

The interpretation of world-building in League of Legends is very focused on the fact that it was first introduced by a game. Vast fictional worlds have historically been introduced by a **windowing technique**, where a part of the world is first shown by a certain media object, and other formats are released afterwards showing other parts of this same world, complementing and adding richness to it (Wolf 2019).

> **In this case, the first and main window was the game League of Legends, the introduction of the fictional world of "Runaterra" to millions of players**

This example of world-building can be contrasted with another cross-media object: the TV show "Game of Thrones". Unlike League of Legends, Game of Thrones was not the window that introduced its fictional world; the first window was the series of books "A Song of Ice and Fire" by George R. R. Martin.

Image 3: series of books "A Song of Ice and Fire"

Afterwards, multiple formats added content to the stated world (see Image 3): books like the novel "Ruination" by Anthony Reynolds (2022) , mobile phone games like "League of Legends Wild Rift" that simulate the same experience, websites displaying statistics and information about the fictional world, fan-made videos, paintings, comic books, graphic novels, and lastly and most importantly, the series "Arcane" (2021) distributed by Netflix and produced by Riot Games and Fortiche Production.
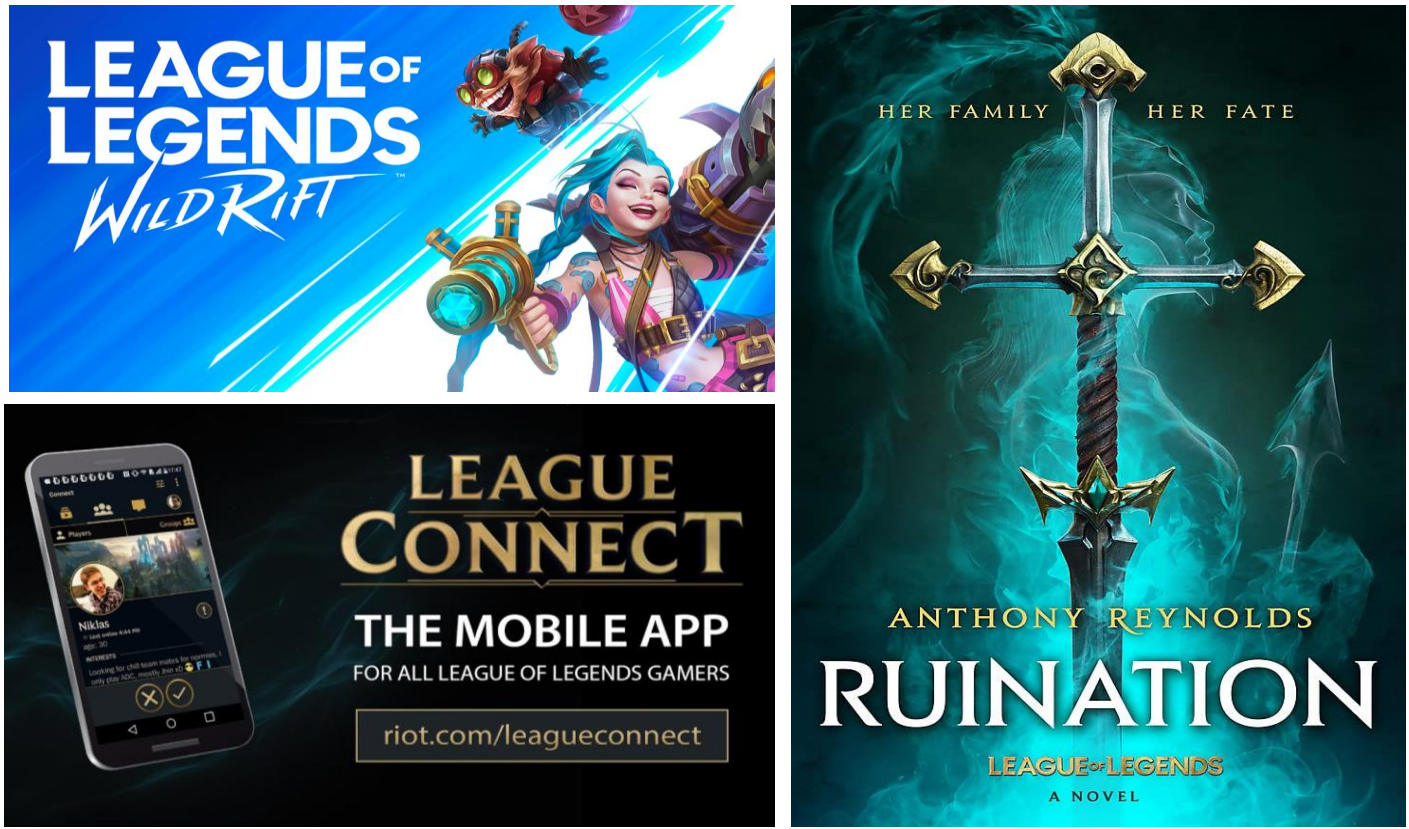

Image 4: different media objects contributing to building the LoL world

The 'Arcane' Window

The series **Arcane** is a good way of showing the importance of the fictional world of Runaterra in a game that, as stated before, shows no presence of said world in its gameplay. The series, however, is set in this world and it introduces characters from the League of Legends gameplay.

Image 5: 'Arcane' Poster

That produces a sense of familiarity in the audience, since they have played using the champions appearing in Arcane and they may even have read their particular stories. In other words, the audience has already developed a certain affection towards the characters. At the same time, it introduces novelty by telling a story in an innovative way and with a new plot that the audience would not expect.

ARCANE

GAME OF THRONES

Arcane is a series set in the fictional world introduced by the main and first window, the game League of Legends. On the other hand, Game of Thrones also presents a world already introduced by "A Song of Ice and Fire".

This narrative resemblance is nothing more than apparent. Game of Thrones tells an almost identical story as the series of books, and its world unfolds in the same way too. However, Arcane does not tell the same story as the gameplay experience of League of Legends– only similar to the background stories of the 'champions' – because there is no story, it is only an arena. Arcane presents 'Runaterra' employing for the first time a concrete, unified plot formalized in a series, while 'The Seven Kingdoms' had been already displayed this way in the story told in the books.

Analysis of Narrative Complexity:
Ozark

"Ozark" is a series distributed by Netflix and released in 2017. The plot follows a family living in the United States, constituted of a wife, a husband, a teenage girl, and a younger boy. While he looks like a normative and traditional US citizen, the father of the family, Marty Byrde, launders money for a Mexican cartel as a job. In the first episode, he avoids being killed by his boss by promising that he will launder money in the opportunity-rich lake of Ozark. It is in this new environment where the family settles and where new characters are introduced while creating an ominous tone and slow pace within an eerie atmosphere filled with tensions, suspense, and plot twists.

Image 6: Ozark Poster

Preemptive Narratives in Ozark

The series increases the suspense by employing different techniques of narrative complexity. Mainly, the use of preemptive narrative to foreshadow expectations, the use of complex characters and the presence of parallel storylines that are connected in a dazzling way for the spectator.

First, the series starts by displaying a scene where Marty Byrde, already settled in the Ozarks, carries bags of cash and explains how money laundering works. After the scene, we are shown events from months before, when the plot itself starts. This is a technique of preemptive narrative, used to make the audience wonder how the show is going to reach the point displayed at the beginning (Pape 2019). The spectators know that the Byrde's will move to the Ozarks to launder money; the question is what happened to them that caused such a big move. Furthermore, preemptive narrative also works in many media objects to mirror situations in real contexts of expectance and future scenarios. For instance, the end of the world due to climate change. In a way, similar to how Marty's boss promises him a very specific situation: all his family killed unless he collects a large sum of money (Pape 2019).

Image 7: still from the opening S1E1

The operational aesthetic of a TV show works, in "Ozark", to amaze the audience by the thickness of the plot and, therefore, offering "the pleasure of unravelling the operations of narrative mechanics" (Mittell 2015, 23). Ozark is compelling, mainly, because of the way all narrative complexities come into play.

Parallel Storylines and Complex Characters in Ozark

The complexity is also achieved by introducing different storylines apparently independent from each other but connected in a hidden and surprising way (Mittell 2015). For instance, Ruth (Image 3) is a young girl from the Ozarks siding with Marty, and Roy Petty (Image 4, top left) is a troubled policeman from Chicago. During the first season, they all have their own storylines, but they overlap when Petty has a love affair with the conservative uncle of Ruth, shaking Ruth's relationship with Marty's business.
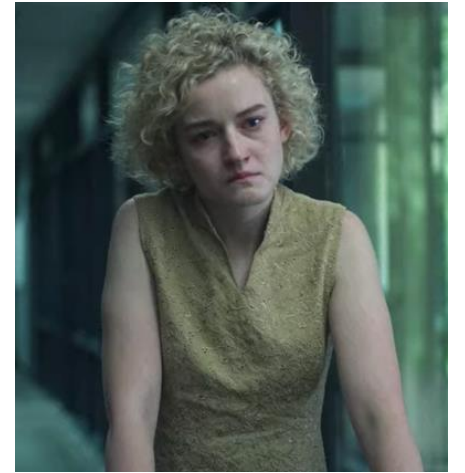

Image 9: Ruth Langmore, local business partner

As stated before, these relations are not apparent in the beginning but revealed through techniques whose purpose is to increase the suspense and engagement of audiences to the series (Mittell 2015). The characters are not only complex because of how their storylines relate to each other, but also by how their development is constructed. They are not flat characters, but rather evolve during the show and display masquerades that, later on, reveal a different nature. For instance, the mother of the family Wendy Byrde is introduced as a disoriented woman lacking affection from her husband but grows to be a ruthless negotiator and business partner.

Image 10: Characters with overlapping storylines in Ozark: troubled policeman Roy Petty (top left); local drug producers Snell's (bottom left); drug lord and Marty's boss "Del" (right)

As a contrasting example, the series Sense8, released in 2015 for the platform Netflix, offers a set of techniques that allow to distinguish the complexity of Ozark.

The series follows a group of eight people that are supernaturally connected in a way that they can control each other's senses. Each of them has a distinguished storyline in a particular part of the world. Like Ozark, in Sense8 these storylines are at first apparently independent; only when the powers are made explicit the audience understands the connection between them. In Ozark, however, that connection is the Byrde's family. While in Sense8 the characters connect with the appearance of the superpower, in Ozark the connection is made with the arrival of the Byrde's family in the lake.

Similarly, in both series there is a development for each of the characters: they evolve and learn throughout the story. The suspense also lies in how each character will learn the skills necessary to overcome each problem.

However, unlike Sense8, where the storylines end up overlapping in a dazzling scenario of community and intercultural support, Ozark's plots interact with each other by means of competition, schemes, and confrontation, where each character has their own interests. While Sense8 connects characters through love and harmony, Ozark's complexity resolves through the opposite: trickery and violence.

Image 11: Sense8 poster

Image 12: Skyrim poster

Analysis of Interactive Fiction:
Skyrim

"The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim" is a game released for Play Station, Xbox and PC produced by Bethesda in 2011. It is considered within the genre of Role Playing Game and set in the fictional world of "Tamriel". It is part of the videogame saga "The Elder Scrolls", in which each videogame is set in a different province of said world. "Skyrim" is set in the homonymous area of Tamriel, in the northern part of it. The fictional world resembles the mediaeval age but with fantastic elements like magic, monsters and, especially, dragons, which become the main enemy of the protagonist.

The game is characterized by allowing a high level of customization: once the adventure starts, the user must create the character that they will control, with the freedom of choosing among many body traits and races, some of them being fantastical creatures like elves or orcs. Not only the user can select different physical features but, as the story progresses, they can decide what fighting style to develop – with non-exclusive options like magic, heavy armor, stealth assassin, archer, etc… - and what type of character to be.

Image 13: different Skyrim races to choose in the character creation

Image 14: different modes of fighting in Skyrim

Choices and Contingencies in Skyrim

Based on the user's choices, the main character is going to be one way or another. Not only that affects the way the character fights, as stated in the previous paragraph, but it also reaches deeper levels in the psychology of the protagonist, even in a moral way. For instance, the user can decide if the character will be a hero that fights for justice and the wellness of the citizens of Skyrim or, in the other extreme, an assassin that kills for a secret brotherhood and does not hesitate in cutting the throat of innocent people. As such, the game contributes to bringing this process of decision-making closer to reality by establishing consequences: if the character hurts someone with a sword, the guards will come and arrest or kill them – in case they try to escape.

Image 15: guard patrolling a city in Skyrim

This set of contingencies establishes a world that, despite being populated by mystic beings and mythological cultures, is structured by a highly normative system where transgressions of the norm are punished. The guards act like the police force would in reality. While it is true that the free will in the game allows for transgressing said norm, doing so makes the experience more difficult. So, it could be argued that it is free will in the sense that 'you are capable' of doing certain actions in the game but, like in other franchises like Grand Theft Auto, it is not free will in the sense that 'you are allowed to'.

The interactivity in Skyrim allows for parallel storylines to coexist. This is translated through the dialogue that the character has with the different Non-Playable Characters. However, the importance of the consequences of choices differs to a great extent. For instance, some conversational decisions will only make the dialogue longer, while others will lead the character to one side quest or another; for instance, joining the 'thieves guild' or not. In a minority of cases, the events are determined by the actions of the character rather than its dialogue; for instance, as explained before, killing a civilian will create a bounty on your head and will make the guards and even bounty hunters prosecute you.

Image 16: interaction in the dialogue of Skyrim

Is there Absolute Free Will in Skyrim?

Interestingly, though, the free will of the character's actions has little to no relevance to the main quest, the main storyline of the game. No matter what dialogue you choose, no matter what route you take to go from point A to B, you will end up doing the same mission and, ultimately, fighting the same final boss anyway.

Image 17: representation of how different interactions lead to the same result in the main quest

What will change is how you get there: maybe by being an assassin archer, maybe a heroic wizard… Therefore, free will is overall an illusion: the choices of the player do not lead to different endings, but they are destined to end the game through the same main quest. Where the game shines is with the side quests and places to explore that Skyrim has to offer; in other words, in everything that surrounds the storyline of the main quests, which then would be a simple axis of the gameplay.

Image 18: still from the game Skyrim

'Skyrim' and 'Life is Strange': a Question of Agency

On a contrasting side, the story of the videogame series "Life is Strange", published by Square Enix in 2015, does have a particular linearity to be followed. The game tells the story of Max trying to save her friend Chloe by travelling back in time continuously. Unlike Skyrim, the decisions of the player occur in preset scenarios rather than an open world, but they can influence what the story of "Life is Strange" is, making it harder or easier for the player to advance. Moreover, the characters of Max and Chloe are realistically developed, with a rich background and flawed characteristics (Pötzsch and Waszkiewics 2019). In Skyrim, the character's personality can only be imagined and fantasized about by the player.

Image 19: "Life is Strange" poster

In "Life is Strange", there is no complete free will in the choice of the story, though. The agency of Chloe and Max is built so that they have control despite a normative system of oppression, but said agency is diminished by means of the tragic narrative setting of the story (Pötzsch and Waszkiewics 2019). That represents the crushing of free will by said structures of oppression. Meanwhile, in Skyrim the interactivity lies rather in the high level of customization and the immensity of side actions and quests, in this case within the recreation of a normative regime as a mediaeval state. Thus, with free will also restrained by the same ideas of an oppressive society.

The character in Skyrim is free to engage in multiple quests and run freely in the world; there are infinite possibilities that would add to the constructed story of the gameplay. Life is Strange contains and offers free will within the predetermined main story with complex and humanized characters that have power over their destiny, but this power is restricted by tragedy reflecting a bigger societal oppression (Pötzsch and Waszkiewicz 2019). In contrast, Skyrim does not have complete free will as the main quest, but in the open world, with a personalized series of side events for the player to experience, but also reflecting a certain societal system of norms that act as contingencies.

By means of free will in an open-world role-playing game, each player constructs their own experience within said contingencies, their own story. And it is done employing interactive fiction.

Analysis of Documentary-Fiction:
Forgotten Silver

"Forgotten Silver" is a 1995 film directed by Peter Jackson. It is an example of a documentary-fiction hybrid; more precisely, an example of a mockumentary. The film aims at portraying a fictional story using the format of a documentary. As such, "Forgotten Silver" tells the story of a fictional genius filmmaker, Colin McKenzie. Using fictional interviews and footage, the movie follows the life of McKenzie since he was a kid, focusing on how he allegedly started and developed his talent for filmmaking.

Image 20: Forgotten Silver poster

Forgotten Silver as Mockumentary

Mockumentaries are forms of documentary-fiction hybrids that, using the formal elements characteristic of a documentary, tell a completely fictional story (Lipkin, Paget and Roscoe 2006). Forgotten Silver adheres to this characterization by using elements of documentary to explain the story of Colin McKenzie.

Image 21: Forgotten Silver title screen

Image 22: Colin McKenzie's fictional footage

First, Jackson uses a variety of footage shot and edited to resemble antiquity. For instance, pictures of the character of McKenzie when he was young.

Second, there are talking heads offering their testimonies, conveying the message in a way that encourages the viewers to forget they are watching fiction. The testimonies explain their relation with McKenzie, but the movie also has the appearance of experts in the preservation of film and experts on the history of the cinema overall.

The use of talking heads provides a closeness to reality, characteristic of the documentary format (Lipkin, Paget and Roscoe 2006). This realism is justified by Forceville (2021) when he argues that, unlike animated documentaries, the material shot by a camera has an indexicality that would unavoidably leave a trace of reality. However, Forgotten Silver's story is fiction, it is not 'true'. Even though it is recorded and is documentary-like, it is not telling a story of reality.

The truthfulness of documentaries and docudramas depends on the level to which the audience trusts the filmmaker's fidelity (Forceville 2021). Even if they make a film about something untrue, a lie, they are still recording facts. However, in mockumentaries like Forgotten Silver, the lie resides within the filmmakers. They are not displaying true facts about something that might be false but telling false facts overall.

Image 23: talking heads interviewed in the film

Functions of Forgotten Silver in a Masked Satire

Lipkin, Paget and Roscoe (2006) name the functions that distinguish the different kinds of documentary fiction. Mockumentaries aim at, mainly, creating a parody but revealing at the same time a critique and deconstruction of a part of reality (Lipkin, Paget and Roscoe 2006). This is accomplished by building on the knowledge that the audience already has. For instance, in Forgotten Silver the spectator is required to know the history of cinema enough to understand that the story told is not real. Then, the function of the film is not only a parody but a special honoring to cinema in general and to the passion for filmmaking, although it can also be read as a critique of the historical mystification of great film directors. In all these cases, the story is fiction but the message that the film conveys is true, as it creates a certain culture and certain ideas around the spectatorship.

Image 24: still from the end of Forgotten Silver

What distinguishes Forgotten Silver from other mockumentaries like Borat (2006) is the level of parody. The former does not use satirical elements, only on a very subtextual level. In Borat, though, the main character is a constant caricature of himself and exaggerates the parody to create humor, to an even unethical level. He also makes fun of real characters and civilians. In other words, the lack of seriousness is made evident.
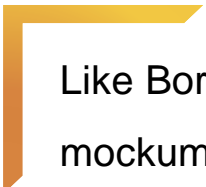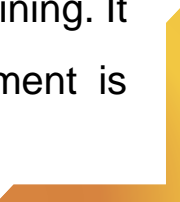

Image 25: "Borat" cropped poster

Image 26: still from the fiction film created by Colin McKenzie

In Forgotten Silver, all the participants appear in a very professional way, and the story is told with apparent rigor and formality. Nevertheless, Forgotten Silver includes a 10 min fiction film, allegedly created by Colin McKenzie. This short part of the movie allows us to see the pure fiction and emphasizes even more the level of formality of the documentary part.

Like Borat, it is important to remember that the primary function of mockumentary is to deliver fiction and, to a great extent, to entertain. Forgotten Silver appears as a formal documentary, but it aims to entertain an informed audience that understands the extravagance of the events that they expose. So, like mockumentaries in general, the film builds on this shared knowledge. However, the satirical aspect of it depends on said prior knowledge. If someone ignores that it is false, the story would be easy to believe, with a few extravagant exceptions presented in it – for instance, arguing that Colin McKenzie invented the close-ups when filming a kiss.

Forgotten Silver delivers a certain satire, so well painted in documentary format that makes the film even more entertaining. It is not as evident as in Borat, but the resulting amusement is present anyway, in a more low-key level.

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