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New directions in hybrid popular television: a reassessment of television mock-documentary

Jelle Mast

UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP, BELGIUM

Beyond reality TV, the rise of TV mock-documentary

In the past few years the fake documentary or so-called ‘mockumentary’, once an underground (film) genre, has gradually made its way into mainstream television production with notable examples like the highly acclaimed BBC series *The Office* and Comedy Central’s *Reno 911*. These fictions that look and sound like documentaries – to put it rather straightforwardly – have taken on a great appeal as ‘reality television’ (or ‘popular factual entertainment’; Corner, 2002) established itself as a staple aspect of contemporary television and popular culture.

The term ‘reality television’ is an unstable designation that covers a wide and hybrid array of ‘popular factual television’ programming, the historical development of which (i.e. since the label was first used in the late 1980’s) can be tracked back to the early ‘accident and emergency’ formats (Kilborn, 2003), the docu-soap ‘era’ and, most recently, various kinds of shows based on the observation of a contrived situation (‘game-doc’ or ‘created-for-TV’, Hill, 2002). This complex set of cross-generic television programmes (re)combines and thus revives traditional television genres, both factual and fictional, such as the game and dating show, lifestyle television, the soap opera, and particularly the documentary. Through its popular appeal and hybrid nature, reality programming plays a most significant part in a broad tendency of the popularization of factual television, which profoundly redefines documentary practice. Yet, at the same time, the relentless rise of prime-time reality formats

replacing the 'serious intent' (to inform, educate or engage) of documentary proper (that is, according to a Griersonian understanding of the documentary project) with the less 'elevated' objective of diversion, also caused anxieties about 'popular factual television' displacing or marginalizing profound (or 'serious') documentary output. The formats' playfulness, both in terms of appeal and genre, poignantly brings to the fore long-standing issues in documentary practice, like the authenticity of the portrayed events (e.g. interference of programme-makers in the pro-filmic, or 'performing' and 'playing up' to the camera on the part of filmed subjects), the tension between recording and the 'creative treatment of actuality' (Grierson, 1933) and questions of ethics (e.g. defiance of human rights, especially the fundamental right to privacy). Moreover, reality television's focus on personal and private experiences and emotions (see e.g. Bondebjerg, 1996), as well as various instances of formats' pursuit of the sensational, the whimsical or the trivia of celebrity life, has made this kind of television programming subject to allegations of tabloidization (as in 'tabloid culture'; see Glynn, 2000), 'dumbing down' or 'lowest common denominator' television, notions which subscribe to a 'reality TV as trash TV' position (Dovey, 2000). 'Popular factual television', therefore, truly is at the intersection of popular culture and documentary practice, and hence connects with many critical topics of debate in these domains. This, in combination with its established status in the contemporary television landscape, makes popular factual television into a likely target of critical commentary regarding documentary conventions and regarding the sociocultural or political context that is often considered to be inherent to mock-documentary.

As Roscoe and Hight (2001) point out regarding mockumentary film, the form tends to appropriate the codes of those documentaries that most plainly bear the marks of the so-called 'Classic Objective Argument', i.e. the classical generic forms associated with discourses of objectivity and rationality.¹ Mockumentary films particularly subvert the authoritative, didactic, omniscient, 'formal' voice (Plantinga, 1997) that is often related to the 'expository' documentary (quite literally deployed through the voice-of-God commentary), or the assertions of objectivity and transparency typical of fly-on-the-wall observational cinema. Moreover, 'exposition' and 'observation' are the principal modes of documentary realism (Corner, 2003), which is essentially part of the mock-documentary project. This particular feature of mock-documentary is similarly apparent in the television forms that are emerging today. For the type of reality television that is most often imitated is the docu-soap format, which stylistically aspires to a 'reactive observationalism' (Corner, 1996) or fly-on-the-wall account of actual events (i.e. without any intervention of the programme-makers in the pro-filmic), in combination with 'the structuring techniques of the soap-opera narrative' (Kilborn, 2000). Thematically, the docu-soap centres on the ordinariness and routines of everyday life, frequently providing a look-behind-the-scenes of familiar institutions and

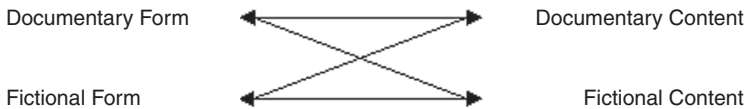
workplaces (e.g. the pioneering and still continuing US series *Cops* [FOX], or well-known British examples such as *Vets in Practice* and *Airport* [BBC]). A recent variant of the docu-soap, the celebrity series, shifts the focus toward the private lives of the famous and the foibles of celebrity culture (a sub-category initiated by *The Osbournes* [MTV]). Fictional series adopting the look of the docu-soap, like *The Office* and *Reno 911*, draw on and expose the taken-for-granted conventions, claims and practices of this kind of television programming.

Yet two recent examples of television mock-documentary in Flanders,² *Kaat & Co* and *Het Geslacht De Pauw* (or *The De Pauw Family*, henceforth *GDP*), shed new light on this hybrid form and suggest that there is more to it than a narrow understanding of the ‘border genre’ implies. This article reconsiders the theorizing of mock-documentary, its aesthetic and cultural meaning, following the developments described above, and in so doing attempts to clarify that muddy area that lies between straightforward fictional and factual television output. A textual analysis of the Flemish cases is extended by a contextual study through in-depth interviews with individuals who were involved in the production of the television shows. For such a comprehensive analysis is needed in order to fully grasp the (‘preferred’) meaning of complex and hybrid television products that play with ideas of ‘generic verisimilitude’ or ‘horizontal intertextuality’ (Fiske, 1987) through which genres normally work.

Theorizing mock-documentary

Walking a delicate line between fictional and factual conventions, mock-documentary is lumped together under the tentative ‘docufiction’ designation with other hybrids like docudrama or reality television that fiddle with television and film representation’s most fundamental aesthetic dichotomy. The particularly ambiguous field of ‘docufiction’ still remains insufficiently mapped and conceptualized – notwithstanding the astute but hardly integrated insights provided in the scholarly literature about the several different forms that thrive in this intricate border area (Corner, 2002; Juhasz and Lerner, 2006; Kilborn, 1994, 2003; Paget, 2004; Rhodes and Springer, 2006; Roscoe and Hight, 2001; Rosenthal and Corner, 2005). The difficulties in coming up with a comprehensive understanding of ‘docufiction’ and its constituent parts seems largely due to the inherent tendency of hybrids to resist a straightforward definition, and similarly to the variety of forms and practices that are covered by the categories of ‘reality television’, ‘docudrama’ and ‘mockumentary’. Not unlike documentary, these categories are rather to be conceived of as ‘open concepts’ (Wittgenstein, 1958) that lack an essential meaning and embrace several different modes and dimensions. This dynamic understanding of hybrid genres is also apparent in mock-documentary theory, which is, however, developing only gradually and still primarily focuses on film genres. Theories of mock-documentary

FIGURE 1
A structural definition of ‘docufictions’ and ‘mockumentary’



Documentary Form + Documentary Content = Documentary
 Documentary Form + Fictional Content = Mockumentary
 Fictional Form + Documentary Content = Docudrama
 Fictional Form + Fictional Content = Fiction

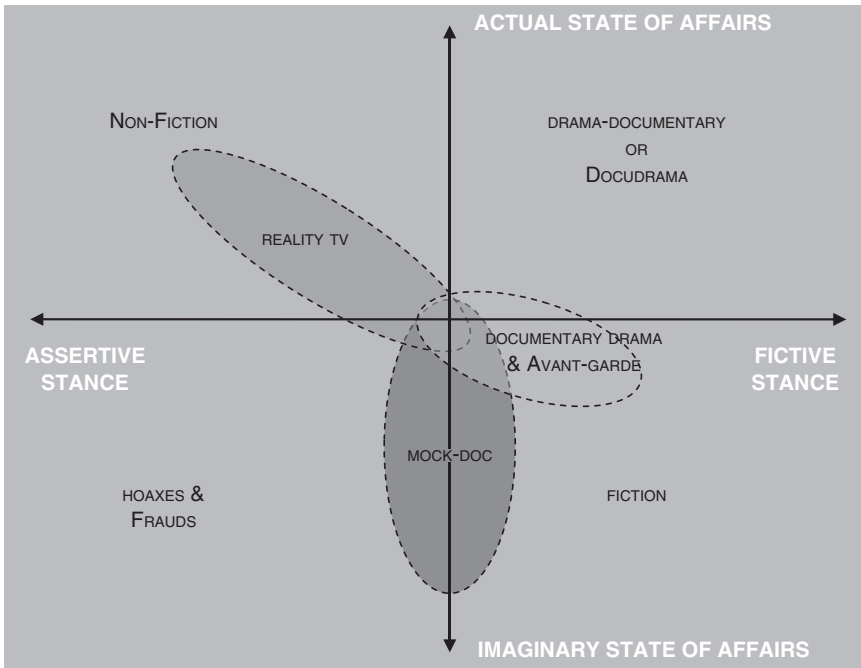
Source: Rhodes and Springer (2006), reprinted here with permission of the authors

do not provide a succinct definition but rather give descriptive accounts of the form that incorporate *textual* parameters (of style, form and content), often in combination with *extra-textual* aspects, more specifically the ‘preferred reading’ of the text (Fiske and Hartley, 1978) and its reception. As empirical research into these contextual areas of production and reception is largely neglected in the study of the mock-documentary, however, these inferences about the mockumentarian’s intent or the viewers’ role in watching the film or programme are more often assumed than actually tested.

Textually, the notion of mock-documentary that emerges, basically, is that of a fiction that looks and sounds like a documentary, or, as Rhodes and Springer (2006) assert, mockumentary is situated where ‘documentary form’ meets ‘fictional content’ (Figure 1).

Yet, in this regard, it could be argued that no particular formal or thematic features exist that are the sole province of either ‘documentary’ or ‘fiction’. As Plantinga (1997) astutely points out, the fundamental distinction between fiction and non-fiction is not predicated on the mediated nature of the representation but is a matter of the ‘stance’ that is taken (textually and extra-textually) toward the particular ‘state of affairs’ portrayed (an idea that is related to the notion of ‘indexing’; Carroll, 1996). Therefore, we could rethink Rhodes and Springer’s structural definition of mockumentary and its cousins and understand mock-documentary as a complex form that projects a (primarily) imaginary world while taking an ambiguous ‘stance’ toward the depicted events (Figure 2). For mock-documentary, through its use of the style and techniques that are conventionally attributed to non-fiction discourse (e.g. voice-over commentary, interview segments, hand-held camera), asserts that the events and people actually exist as such in the world as portrayed (‘assertive stance’). At the same time, however, it indicates textually (e.g. well-known actors, exaggerated or surreal characters and events, credits) and/or extra-textually (e.g. labelling and presentation on website, media coverage and television magazines, award nominations) that this world projection is merely presented for

FIGURE 2
Situating the mock-documentary form in the ‘docufiction’ area³



the audience’s consideration rather than actually existing (‘fictive stance’). This fiddling with ‘assertive’ and ‘fictive’ stances, and the tension between documentary’s project to ‘instil belief’ versus the ‘suspension of disbelief’ of fiction (Nichols, 2001; Roscoe and Hight, 2001) that ensues, distinguishes mock-documentary from classical fiction and non-fiction. Likewise, the acknowledgement of the text’s fictitious nature sets mockumentary apart from hoaxes, frauds and other instances of outright deception of the audience regarding the ontological status of the portrayed events. Or, as Juhasz and Lerner (2006: 10) poignantly assert: ‘A fake documentary unmarked, and so unrecognized, is a documentary.’

Although the ambiguous yet distinctive set of textual parameters to some extent carves out a place for mock-documentary along with the other border genres in the ‘docufiction’ area, the designation remains a particularly vague umbrella term that needs further elaboration in the form of modes and dimensions. Except for Roscoe and Hight’s (2001) ground-breaking work on the subject, conceptualizations of mockumentary are conspicuous by their absence. The authors distinguish between three degrees of mock-documentary – ‘parody’, ‘critique’ and ‘deconstruction’ – which are construed as constituting a sliding

scale that ranges from the 'benevolent' to the 'hostile' appropriation of documentary conventions, and vary regarding the extent to which they bring the inherent reflexivity (self-referentiality or metacommentary) of mock-documentary to fruition. As such, their interpretation subscribes to predominant notions of mockumentary that relate imitation and appropriation to ideas of commentary, playful or critical, and strategies of reflexivity, latent or manifest, and to 'the satirical or ironic examination of a fictional subject' (Rhodes and Springer, 2006: 5). In accordance with the (non-academic) origin of the 'mockumentary' designation as a descriptive phrase for Rob Reiner's classic fake 'rockumentary' *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), the appropriation of the formal conventions of non-fiction discourse in a fictional context is commonly associated with the long-standing cultural forms of satire and parody. That is, Roscoe and Hight (2001: 47, 50) argue that mockumentary's agenda is 'ultimately to parody the assumptions and expectations associated with factual discourse', and (differentiating the form from its 'docufiction' cousin 'docudrama') that 'the appropriation of documentary codes and conventions is used not so much to anchor the argument in the real world or to bolster claims to truth, but rather to offer critical commentary'. Juhasz and Lerner's (2006: 7) insightful collection of articles, on the other hand, suggests a more inclusive understanding of mock-documentary, describing the phenomenon as 'fiction films that make use of ... documentary style and therefore acquire its associated content (the moral and social) and associated feelings (belief, trust, authenticity) to create a documentary experience defined by their antithesis, self-conscious distance'. Nonetheless, they subsequently assert that 'revelatory and corrosive action' or 'self-referentiality and criticality' are definitive of the form. This article argues against any narrowing down of 'mocking' to notions of commentary or subversion and elaborates mockumentary theory to the domain of television, based on recent developments in mainstream television programming, exemplified by *The Office*, *Reno 911* and particularly the Flemish cases that are discussed here.

New modes in town?

Research design

As indicated above, a comprehensive understanding of (television) mockumentary's 'preferred' aesthetic and cultural meaning requires a textual analysis, but equally needs to move beyond the confines of the 'text' so as to take into account the production side and broader 'contexts' of television scheduling, popular culture and society at large. This study, therefore, combines an analysis of the form and content of two Flemish cases of television mockumentary with a qualitative investigation of the show's production, 'indexing' (i.e. categorization, see Carroll, 1996) and scheduling, thereby building on theoretical insights from documentary studies and genre theory. In order to unravel

the complex meanings of these hybrid cultural forms and to weigh up the assumptions emerging from the textual component of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who were involved in the production process. The qualitative interview as a research method is particularly suited to elicit the mockumentarian's (implicit) understanding of the form, and hence to reveal the underlying strategies and 'preferred reading' of the mockumentary. Altogether, four members of the production teams of the shows were interviewed, the numbers were equally distributed across both cases. Respondents were first and foremost selected based on theoretical criteria, that is, their specific involvement in the creative process of making the programme, although practical constraints (e.g. willingness to participate in the research project) also played a part. Eventually, we succeeded in interviewing the head of the production company that produces *Kaat & Co*, who was involved in all stages of the production process, an actor playing one of the main characters in this series, and the production assistant and the director's assistant of *GDP*. Interviewees who were only engaged in particular stages of the production process nevertheless, due to the small size of the production crews, proved to be able to provide insightful and theoretically significant accounts of the programmes' concept and aims. Moreover, in both instances information taken from the official websites of the television programme, the production company and/or the broadcaster, as well as from occasional press interviews with members of the production teams about the respective shows, was used and integrated with the findings of the textual analysis and the interviews. Before elaborating our aesthetic and cultural analysis, we will briefly introduce the cases under study.

Two Flemish cases of mockumentary television

GDP and *Kaat & Co* are fictional series relying on the docu-soap format, made by Flemish television production companies and transmitted by the general channel Één of the public service broadcaster (VRT) in Flanders. Één is the largest player in the Flemish television landscape in terms of market share (an average of about 30 percent in 2007; CIM-Audimetrie, 2007). Up to the present day, these programmes are unique examples of prime-time television mockumentary in Flanders (with the exception of *In de Gloria* [Canvas/VRT]), a parody sketch show that especially alludes to human-interest television magazines, and *16+* (Één), a copy of *Kaat & Co* that settles into a high school and focuses on teachers' and students' lives at work and at home).

GDP is a production of Woestijnvis, a thriving television production company that since it was founded in 1997 has been exclusively committed to VRT. As a consequence of this unique position in the Flemish television market, as well as its numerous successes (in terms of ratings, reviews and awards), Woestijnvis has gradually become renowned for its high-quality,

innovative and ethically responsible television programming. *GDP* astutely exemplifies the company's profile, and ran for two seasons only, achieving an average market share of about 27 percent (Woestijnvis, n.d.). It also received the annual award for best television show in 2004, set up by one of the leading weekly magazines in Flanders, *Humo*. The show looks like any other celebrity docu-soap and follows the life of celebrated television-maker Bart De Pauw, who actually works at Woestijnvis and acts as himself, and the other members of his family (his wife Maaïke and their children, his mother and his brother Benny, who are all living together, and his brother Tom and sister-in-law Tine). *GDP* combines serialized narrative strands of interpersonal relationships (especially the complicated [love] relationships between Bart and Maaïke, and Tom and Tine) with a clear emphasis on the situation humour of family life, and in this particular case aspects of celebrity culture (e.g. fame, fandom, persona), which also relates the show to the (episodic) generic form of the family sitcom (Hartley, 2003).

The second case, *Kaat & Co*, is a serial about everyday issues in the lives of a young woman, Kaat Cremer, the rest of her family (primarily her biological parents and brother) and their friends, who live in Antwerp, Flanders. The multiple narratives are set against the contemporary background of a middle-class, reconstituted family situation (Kaat's parents are divorced) and urban life, with a focus on interpersonal relationships and emotions developing from events in the characters' private and professional lives (e.g. youth, love relationships, adultery, drug and alcohol abuse, marital difficulties, health or financial problems). The programme was created by Sputnik TV, a relatively new production company founded in 2003, which also supplies docu-soaps to the public broadcaster on a regular basis. The pilot episode of the series went on air in March 2004 on a Sunday evening, typically the most high-rating slot in the television schedule. Yet the series was subsequently shown in prime-time on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. After the peak viewership of the premier episode (market share of 34 percent; CIM-Audimetrie, 2004), audiences for *Kaat & Co* initially dropped but later gradually climbed, resulting in an average market share of about 23 percent throughout its entire run (VRT, 2008). In 2005 the programme received nominations for the prestigious Golden Rose awards for entertainment television, and the Prix Europa, an initiative of the European Cultural Foundation and the Council of Europe. After running for five seasons, *Kaat & Co*'s final episode was transmitted in May 2007.

Mockumentary and the ambiguous stance

The role of extra-textual indexing and scheduling

The generic status of a television programme is established through its (perceived) adherence to a particular set of formal and thematic conventions, in

combination with contextual factors such as scheduling and its categorization in media coverage and by the television industry itself.

A close inspection of the terms and descriptions that circulate in media discourses, on the official websites of the production companies and broadcaster, and in our interviews, indicates the difficulty of consistently pinning down what *Kaat & Co* and *GDP* amount to in terms of fiction and non-fiction. *Kaat & Co* is commonly described as ‘docufiction’ and a ‘fictional docu-soap’, although the producer we interviewed adds that the production company internally regards the format as pure fiction (also, the Golden Rose nomination was in the category ‘soap’). On the homepage of Sputnik TV the programme is indeed to be found in the ‘fiction’ section, yet, is described as ‘docufiction’ elsewhere on the site. As for *GDP*, the interviewees discussed the programme in terms of a ‘fictional docu-soap’, while the website of *Woestijnvis* as well as the official site of the show, which is significantly set up from the point of view of the family members and thus adds to the series’ ambiguous ‘stance’, either refer to it as ‘docu-soap’, ‘reality soap’ or ‘documentary series’.

Moreover, the advent of *GDP* followed by *Kaat & Co* in early 2004 came with the ‘rebranding’ of the *Één* channel, which entailed a new name and logo but also new sorts of programming. Similarly, this change included a rearrangement of the prime-time schedule during weekdays: the channel’s popular soap *Thuis* was relocated to a later slot, creating a vacant spot early in the evening schedule, right after the news and a daily human-interest magazine. This gap between two high-rating programmes was subsequently filled with ‘docufiction’ like *Kaat & Co* on Tuesday and Thursday, and traditional docu-soaps on Monday and Wednesday, thus creating an interesting (yet possibly confusing to some) parallel between both genres (also accomplished through the inclusion of a ‘slice of life’ phrase in *Kaat & Co*’s full title). Moving *Kaat & Co* to an earlier slot (it started off following *Thuis*) made sense because of its large share of the young audience, but also indicated a typical hammock strategy at work, enabling new initiatives in television programming to develop gradually (VRT, 2005). *GDP* initially followed *Thuis* on Friday evening, the ‘comedy’ spot in the broadcaster’s schedule, but moved to the top Sunday evening slot for its second season.

The (fictional) docu-soap look

As *Kaat & Co* and *GDP* essentially rely on the plotting and structuring devices typical of soaps and sitcoms, their narrative appeal is much the same as that of traditional fictional family series. However, the combination of topics of everyday life, first-person experiences and emotions, and character interaction with a marked documentary ‘look’ relates these programmes to the docu-soap format. In this regard, *Kaat & Co* and *GDP* could be understood as fictional counterparts of series like *An American Family* (PBS), *The Family* (BBC) or *Sylvania Waters* (ABC/BBC) and of celebrity docu-soaps, respectively. Similar to these early and recent predecessors, our cases are

based on the premise of observational cinema settling into a particular setting and providing an account of life as it unfolds in front of the camera's eye. Thus, small crews shoot on location with lightweight camera equipment, relying on available light only, and (apparently) eschewing any interference with the pro-filmic event. However, as is the case with the typical docu-soap format, the assumption of a fly-on-the-wall observationalism that ensues from such an approach is undermined in the series under study. That is, the filmed subjects frequently acknowledge the presence of the camera crew as they reflect, comment, inform, testify or recount while going about their doings or in interview segments (where we occasionally see or hear the interviewer). Moreover, the audience is directly addressed by descriptive voice-over narration, and there is the addition of a musical soundtrack to heighten the dramatic, emotional or ludicrous appeal of the moment. Through the use of the conventional formal features of the docu-soap mentioned above, and drawing on the expectations of a 'knowing' audience (that is familiar with these codes and their truth claims), the programme-makers attempt to enhance the reality credentials of the series.

Yet, at the same time, features like voice-over commentary and particularly interview segments that are typically related to non-fiction discourses, extend the representational strategies of the programme-makers. In contrast to traditional fictional series, which most often shun these techniques so as to minimally disrupt the 'fascinated' involvement of the viewer in the diegesis, mockumentaries use commentary and interviews to provide descriptive or explanatory accounts and testimonies, which develop the narrative and the characters in ways common to the docu-soap format. *Kaat & Co* and *GDP* deploy voice-over narration (provided by an 'external', male narrator) rather restrictively to effect transitions (also accomplished through the musical score and, in *Kaat & Co*, through inserts of city life which convey a sense of the 'townscape' and add to the series' urban atmosphere) and to briefly introduce or situate scenes, all in order to orientate the viewer and advance the narrative. Reflections or testimonies on the part of the filmed subjects are used more commonly, and serve, in the words of one of our respondents, as 'interior monologues'. In *Kaat & Co* characters are typically taken aside and interviewed, while the family members in *GDP* more often directly address the crew and the camera, to the extent that the camera becomes a character of its own. The interaction between family members and production team makes for the humour and the reflexivity of the show (see p. 245).

However, while the shows purposely replace the stylistic smoothness of classical fiction with (the mimetic realism associated with) the evidentiary qualities of (observational) documentary techniques, they actually to a great extent retain the 'scopic mobility' (Corner, 1996) and the pro-filmic arrangement typical of fictional narratives, with scenes regularly being shot in several takes (cf. 'proactive mode of observationalism'; Corner, 1996: 28). The portrayal of a fictional world also lends the programme-makers a certain degree of 'artistic licence'

(to alter or distort the ‘actuality’ or ‘authenticity’ of pro-filmic events and subjects), and relieves them of the ethical constraints that guide ‘good practice’ in documentary production (with the exception of the treatment of the occasional ‘social actor’ (Nichols, 2001) appearing in the mockumentary series, see below; see also Nichols, 2001). As a consequence, the mockumentary format can show things – e.g. intimate behaviour and conversations, strong emotions, embarrassing situations – that are impossible or improper to capture in the classical docu-soap, thus expanding the means of programme-makers to create a realistic, dramatic, comic and/or critical account.

Reshaping the state of affairs presented: on location, (social) actors, improvisation

Both *Kaat & Co* and *GDP* reshape (ideas of) mockumentary’s fictional content or imaginary state of affairs, which is particularly clearly illustrated in the pro-filmic space. The shows are almost entirely shot *on location*, when events take place in public spaces or when characters are followed around at home and at work. *Kaat & Co* is set at various sites in the city centre of Antwerp and the living places of the main characters are ‘real’ settings (instead of studios). In the case of *GDP*, the everyday life of the family at their mansion is crosscut with activities in the outside world, including appearances at typical occasions of celebrity life, such as (real) parties following media events. So, in spatial terms, the series’ narratives largely unfold in an a-filmic environment (that exists independent of the television production context), which enhances the authenticity of the projected events and, in combination with the ‘present tense’ time-frame, underscores the topicality of the content. Current events, incidents and issues are integrated in the mockumentary world construction (e.g. references in *Kaat & Co* to riots in the streets of Antwerp following the shooting of a migrant inhabitant, and *GDP*’s incorporation of the show’s reception and audience ratings). A significant consequence of taking the actual shooting on location is that *non-actors*, both ordinary people and Flemish celebrities, are somehow involved in the unfolding events. Both series mingle the use of professional actors and extras typical of fiction with documentary subjects acting as themselves. These ordinary individuals are usually asked to participate in the filming on the spot. When their participation in the show involves more than their mere presence or a small intervention, like participants in reality programmes, these people are actively searched for and selected based on the way they come across on television, their spontaneity. In *Kaat & Co*, these characters tend to be drawn on for minor roles only, as a type of ‘extended extra’. *GDP*, however, elaborates the part of non-actors as some of them take up significant supporting roles. The family’s (grand)mother, for instance, is actually Bart De Pauw’s real-life mother-in-law, while the character of Willy, the neighbour (who supposedly continues to live next door although the family has moved between the first and second season) is played by the father of a crew member. Also, the series

regularly features public figures – actors and non-actors – who appear as themselves, although within the parameters of the series' narrative.

The (*semi*-)professional actors solicited in these series were relatively unknown to the television audience prior to transmission of the programmes – and were often drawn from theatre. This at least initially bolstered – whether intentionally or not – the real-life appeal of the characters they acted out. Similar to soaps or sitcoms, the main characters in both cases are introduced in an opening sequence, with *GDP* including feigned bloopers, an early marker of the show's ironic tone. In the case of *Kaat & Co*, the actors personify fictitious but nonetheless identifiable characters, who are caught up in multiple, interweaving and prolonged storylines akin to those in a traditional soap. The characters, their personalities, backgrounds and development, are entirely scripted by the programme-makers and outlined in so-called 'back stories', which the actors rely on to embody their respective roles (*GDP* takes a similar approach). And while they are allowed more 'authorship', in a sense, because of the use of improvisation instead of a script (see p. 243), actors in *Kaat & Co* are actually not that different from their fictional counterparts with regard to mixing their private (actual) and character (fictional) personae (if any). The cast members of *GDP*, however, have a rather ambiguous role. That is, the actors are caught up in their roles as members of an intact yet dysfunctional family, who are poles apart but inevitably stuck with each other, which closely aligns with the common format of the 'family sitcom' (Hartley, 2003). The tensions between the different characters – Bart's extreme self-absorption; Maaïke's candour; Tom's outrage, wrongdoing and insensitivity; Tine's naiveté; and Benny's unworldly beliefs and separation from the others – are ongoing narratives throughout the series. The family members' idiosyncrasies are typically played up through the particular situations they find themselves in, which interestingly often develop from the circumstances of the production of the documentary (illustrative is the recurrent theme of Benny's resistance to his family's participation in the television series). It is the combination of stereotypical characterizations, which to a greater or lesser extent draw on the targets of ironic commentary, the performances of the actors and non-actors, as well as the ludicrous events that unfold, that creates the humorous appeal of the programme.

Yet the characters in the series are walking a delicate line between their real and imaginary persona, which is especially true of Bart and his wife. All main actors in the series use their real names and have some things in common with their character, but what is remarkable about Bart and Maaïke is that they also appear as themselves. *GDP* thus finds itself caught between the 'nominal' representations of Bart and Maaïke as fictional and magnified characterizations, and the 'physical' portrayals of them as real-life personalities (Carroll, 1996). Bart De Pauw is basically acting as himself, a Flemish television-maker working at Woestijnvis, who became famous for several successful programmes, aspects which are referred to repeatedly throughout the series. For instance,

we see Bart visiting his workplace to show off his sponsored car or discussing the likelihood of a third season of the series with the television company's CEO. Also, his earlier successes are alluded to when well-known colleagues from particular productions turn up, as Bart presents his memoirs or in the context of the media training workshop he is organizing. Similarly, Maaïke is an actress in the series as she is in real life, and the first season even explicitly incorporates her having a part in a prestigious Flemish police series, *Aspe*, counter-scheduled by the main commercial channel to *GDP*. Bart helps his wife to rehearse her lines, accompanies her to the set, and the main character of *Aspe* appears as himself in one of the episodes. Therefore, Bart and Maaïke could be thought of as 'composite characters', that is, as characters who are essentially a mixture of the actors' real-life personae and entirely scripted traits.

In addition to these idiosyncratic performances, the uncertainty surrounding the portrayed events' ontological status is enhanced through the rather ambiguous use of *scenario* and *script*. Like the approach to the characters' personalities (use of 'back stories', see p. 242), the programme-makers sketch out sequences of events that make up the narrative, yet, leave much to the improvisation of the actors. In *Kaat & Co* the cast is purposely left in the dark about the course of events and plot turns, with actors usually being filled in about the scene to come only briefly beforehand. *GDP* equally works at short notice, in what one of our interviewees called 'guerrilla-style', often allowing only one week between briefing the crew for the next episode and the broadcast date. Moreover, the series make no use whatsoever of scripted dialogue, except for occasional jokes in *GDP*. Actors consequently (have to) rely entirely on the 'back stories' of their respective characters and their particular embodiment of the character, to enact the situations they encounter and improvise their lines on the spot. This looseness regarding dialogues also pertains to the level of execution, which is most significantly illustrated by some actors speaking their regional dialects instead of standard Dutch (e.g. Maaïke in *GDP* has a West-Flemish accent while her character in *Aspe* speaks standard Dutch; Kaat and some other actors in *Kaat & Co* have an Antwerp accent). The reliance on improvisation is decisive in the composition of the cast, since the programme-makers are looking for actors who are able 'to make it up as they go along', while the 'enhanced' creativity also draws a particular kind of actor.

Altogether, these parameters significantly underscore the ambiguity that typically surrounds the mock-documentary form. *GDP*, in particular, pushes the envelope in this regard and convolutes mock-documentary's typical play with fiction and non-fiction conventions to the extent that the difficulty of distinguishing 'reality' from 'imagination' becomes a key element of the form's appeal. Likewise, the combination of these features amplifies the alleged credibility and authenticity of the portrayed events, adding a distinctive mimetic (formal) realism to the referential (thematic) realism (and still other forms of realism, e.g. emotional) of the shows. This is particularly evident in the case of *Kaat & Co*, and aligns the form as a fictional docu-soap or docu-sitcom with

similar practices in the related areas of documentary-drama and avant-garde film (cf. Dogma 95 movement). Yet, additionally, the simultaneous deployment of fictional depiction's 'artistic licence' to *create* and *show* things and techniques of non-fiction discourse to directly address viewers and *tell* them what is happening, extends the representational strategies of the classical soap or sitcom in terms of story development. Thus, the particularities of the docu-soap format (e.g. the intrusion of the camera crew into the field, the format's relatedness to celebrity culture) in and of themselves create a powerful momentum for sitcom's characteristic comedy, as exemplified in *GDP*.

Hostile and benevolent appropriation

As the discussion above suggests, appropriation of documentary aesthetics in a fictional (con)text serves many purposes. According to Roscoe and Hight's (2001) theory of degrees of mockness in mock-documentary, the borrowing of documentary techniques may also be understood as extending sliding scales of intentionality, ranging from a 'benevolent' to a 'hostile' appropriation, and of reflexivity, from latent to manifest. In their somewhat one-sided notion of mockumentary as commentary (which, though, incorporates modalities of intent and target), the authors associate a benevolent appropriation and *implicit* reflexivity quite restrictively with strategies of parody or comic effect, playing with the 'contrast between the rational and irrational, between a sober form and an absurd or comic subject' (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 68). Yet, this conceptualization is at odds with the multiple potential uses of mockumentary found in our study. The benevolent adoption of documentary aesthetics is by no means essentially tied to parody or irony but is equally applied to (re)construct and instil factual discourse's reality credentials, as *Kaat & Co* clearly illustrates. Moreover, when it *is* used in a humorous context, as in the case of *GDP*, the discrepancy between the 'serious' form and 'comic' subject of the text is attenuated through the docu-soap format's already lightweight tone. Particularly the celebrity docu-soap, either as a prop or target for the mock-documentary project, moves away from idea(l)s of observational cinema as an objective, transparent and sober representation of actual events ('Classic Objective Argument', 'discourses of sobriety', see Nichols, 1991) toward a frivolous form and appeal. So, while a series like *GDP* surely uses the (celebrity) docu-soap format as a convenient vehicle to parody aspects of popular culture (and celebrity culture in particular), the role of the adopted style in the series' comic appeal at least in part comes from an *openly* reflexive integration of the docu-soap format as a facilitator of the absurd situations that essentially make up the sitcom genre (see p. 242).

Yet, what also marks *GDP* out is that this show, as part of its overall critique of celebrity culture, provides a sustained deconstruction of the celebrity docu-soap as a cultural form and documentary practice, thereby alluding to

broad issues inherent to observational cinema and the documentary project in general. Conceived of as a celebrity docu-soap about a fictitious family built on the premise 'to start where other celebrity soaps end' (which is obviously enabled through the 'artistic licence' of the fiction author), *GDP* exposes factual discourse and documentary ethics. This multi-faceted target of the show's commentary was poignantly described by one of our interviewees as 'showing the vanity of Flemish celebrities, and the ugliness of camera crews'. What ensues is a mock-documentary adopting the conventions of the observational mode, or rather the docu-soap format, but incorporating instances of a reflexive strategy as well. Precisely because of the series' underlying idea of the camera's unrelenting gaze, moments of interaction and negotiation between family members and crew are often featured in the series, which is unlikely to occur in a 'classical' docu-soap. As such, *GDP* breaks through observational cinema's pretence of unobtrusiveness, to the extent that the camera becomes a character of its own. Typical in this regard is the way the series begins, as we see the crew, apparently having arrived too early at the family's front door, with Bart asking them to 'redo' the arrival and making suggestions about how to arrange what is to become the 'actual' opening scene of the show. Bart's idea is to open the door carrying his daughter, because that is the way 'the Pfaffs are doing it'. The mere inclusion of this scene confronts the viewer from the outset with the seemingly revealing and reflexive tone of the series and the main character's intention to control his appearance. At the same time, the explicit reference to 'the Pfaffs' (a popular docu-soap about former Belgian goalkeeper Jean-Marie Pfaff and his family) establishes a link with this pioneering instance of the celebrity docu-soap in Flanders (see Dhoest, 2004) and with the subgenre in general. As the implications of the presence of the crew and the production of the documentary series serve as key instigators of the ludicrous situations that drive the narrative and enable character development (most notably Bart's narcissism and Benny's resistance), examples are truly manifold all through the programme. From the incessant discussions between family members and crew as to what is worthy of being filmed – or acceptable – and what is not, to the incorporation of self-referential segments like interviews with the family about their participation, *GDP* is as much about the making of a docu-soap as anything.

In so doing, *GDP* renders an image of 'reality television' that is particularly critical of the participants as well as of the practitioners, and of the authenticity of the format of the (celebrity) docu-soap in general. The idea of an unobtrusive and objective onlooker of fly-on-the-wall documentary is deconstructed through the frequent interventions of the crew in the pro-filmic. For crew members sometimes collaborate with the family, but they also manipulate – through comments and other interventions – the events unfolding in front of the camera to the family members' disadvantage. Typical is the character of the inexperienced and rather forthright sound man, whose comments undermine Bart's self-image and make explicit the ironic contrast with Bart's

'real' public persona that underlies the series' narrative and humorous appeal. Moreover, the camera often assumes the role of a Peeping Tom, catching the family members unawares in private or intimate situations they would rather not have disclosed (e.g. Bart making a phone call to the broadcaster to check the accuracy of the show's [temporarily] low audience ratings; Bart and Maaïke arguing about Bart's extra-marital son; or Tom cheating on his fiancée). This filming of the participants without their consent, and even in spite of their explicit objections on some occasions, adds to the sense that the crew is actually 'out to get' them and by no means protects the family members, and Bart in particular, from themselves. In this regard, *GDP* offers a strong critique of the ethics of popular factual television production, strikingly exposing several possible pitfalls like intrusion on people's privacy, embarrassment of participants, or distortion and creation of false impressions through editing, all apparently legitimized through the release form signed at the outset (Gross et al., 1988). Moreover, the depiction of a nosy camera crew, craving for the sensational and for the trivia and foibles of celebrity life, aligns with notions of 'tabloidization' and a 'reality TV as trash TV' position (Dovey, 2000).

However, while Bart and his family are victimized in this regard, they are at the same time portrayed as 'knowing' subjects, (vainly) trying to establish the public image they aspire to and anxious to control the series' depiction of the family. This astutely points at ongoing issues in the broad critical debate about the ethics and authenticity of documentary and reality programming, more specifically the conflicting interests of the different parties involved and the monitoring of conduct or performances (see Goffman, 1969) on the part of the filmed subjects, provoked by the camera presence. As an imitation of the celebrity docu-soap, *GDP* magnifies these issues and relates them to a more elaborated criticism of today's celebrity culture. The apparent all-pervasive desire to be famous (stirred and enabled by the rise of reality television), and the format of the celebrity docu-soap, are lampooned and criticized through the main character of Bart, who is the epitome of a celebrity with a narcissistic personality, obsessed with his image, who thinks of himself as standing above the world as a role model but whose heyday is actually in the past. The series' deconstruction of the notion of 'fame', which includes a renunciation of 'fandom' (Bart's sole fan is the archetypical example of a 'pathological fan', an 'obsessed loner'; Jensen, 1992), is also personified by Benny's 'resistance' (who, for instance, goes to an Alcoholics Anonymous-type self-help group for family members of Flemish celebrities). This particularly harsh appraisal of celebrity culture actually serves as the background against which the format of the celebrity docu-soap is understood. Bart (and his family) symbolizes the celebrity figure using the television format in an overarching strategy of publicity and 'commodification' of his celebrity status (taking advantage of the commercial and promotional benefits of participation in a

popular television series through sponsoring, merchandising, special discounts for celebrities, 'meet and greets'), while satisfying his/her desires as a narcissistic personality and (fruitlessly) attempting to uphold or regain a self-image that is aspired to.

Conclusions: rethinking the mock-documentary

In this article attention has been drawn to the still largely unattended to area of mock-documentary television, a hybrid screen form whose cultural appeal has heightened considerably in the context of the proliferation of reality television. Following the emergence of two particular instances of mockumentary television in the prime-time schedule of the Flemish public broadcaster, predominant notions of the mock-documentary form and its 'use value' were reassessed. In order to do so, we argued for a comprehensive approach that elaborates the findings of a textual analysis with the 'preferred reading' of the texts as articulated by the programme-makers.

As stated above, mock-documentary is a muddy area in need of clarification and conceptualization. Common understandings of the form that narrow down its potential meanings or uses to ideas of commentary and criticality ('mocking' as 'irony') constrain the analytical usefulness of the term, while broad interpretations that all too easily lump together different breeds of 'docufiction' are equally unproductive. Contrary to these arguments, our study indicates, first, that the mock-documentary label is to be conceived of as an umbrella term or 'open concept' that comes in many forms ('mocking' as 'imitation'). Second, this article contends that there is a place for mock-documentary in the 'docufiction' area, as a distinct category related to yet distinguished from other hybrids like reality television and documentary-drama. Mock-documentary theory, therefore, could benefit from a dynamic taxonomic approach, which has already proven to be a useful tool in mapping multi-faceted cultural phenomena, like the documentary (Corner, 1996, 2002; Nichols, 1991, 1994, 2001; Plantinga, 1997).

Our analysis of the two Flemish cases shows the potential of the form as a powerful vehicle for sociocultural (and political) commentary and/or critique of documentary conventions, practices and the highly controversial 'reality television' phenomenon, from outside. However, at the same time the case of *Kaat & Co* reveals that the appropriation of documentary codes may move beyond the corrosion of the genre's 'truth' or 'reality' claims and achieve quite the opposite, serving to bolster the reality credentials of the programme and its particular world projection. Or, instead of a *deconstruction* of the 'assertive stance' (Plantinga, 1997) of factual discourse, there is a *reconstruction* or 'reinstallation' of the belief in documentary's (and docu-soap's) capacity to provide a truthful account of a particular real-life event.

What is more, in stretching the conventions of and hence reviving long-standing television genres like the soap or the sitcom, while also extending the means or 'representational strategies' of television-makers, our cases suggest that broader tendencies are at work here. For *GDP* and *Kaat & Co* equally relate to processes of cross-fertilization, 'multiple generic participation' and 'horizontal recombination' (Feuer, 1992) characteristic of a 'post-documentary' (Corner, 2002) or 'recombinant' (Gitlin, 2000) (television) culture. The establishment of reality television in today's television culture, has not only made this phenomenon into a likely target of ironic or critical commentary, but also provides practitioners in the television industry with another 'tested' formula which they can rely on in the creation of ever 'new' forms of television output. In combination with its low-budget production, mock-documentary is a valuable concept for the 'innovative' television-maker or production company operating in a competitive television market. Any taxonomic endeavour, as mentioned above, should therefore be eclectic in nature, integrating insights from documentary, television and film studies, genre theory and discourse analysis.

Is television mock-documentary here to stay, or will it instead prove to merely be a 'thing of the moment'? The success of our cases suggests that there is a place for mockumentary on mainstream television, either as contemporary forms of parodic or satirical commentary on society, popular culture or the documentary project, or as a distinctive style or even (meta)genre (or both). Yet, in this regard, the appraisal by the audiences will play an important part. Media coverage, or audience ratings and discussions (e.g. on online forums) reveal an ambiguous reception of the shows, and the debate appears polarized, dividing the audience in 'pro' and 'anti' groups. Critical discussion of the mockumentary category, and its aesthetic and cultural meaning, would therefore not only benefit from a profound conceptualization and clarification of the myriad practices and forms covered by the designation, but also necessitates research into empirical contexts of reception. Audience research regarding mockumentary is a largely neglected area so far. Yet it could contribute significantly to a comprehensive understanding of the form, uncovering processes of meaning-making and testing the 'preferred reading' of the mockumentary-maker, and as such complement the approach taken in this article.

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Notes

1. In Nichols' terms (1991, 1994), the 'Classic Objective Argument' refers to the 'expository', 'observational' and 'interactive' modes of documentary representation.
2. Flanders is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, inhabited by 60 percent of the Belgian population.
3. Thought of in terms of the ontological nature of the 'state of affairs' presented and the 'stance' taken toward the portrayed events (textually and extra-textually), the mock-documentary form is distinguished from fiction and non-fiction genres and other hybrids in the 'docufiction' area. To the extent that mock-documentary's 'state of affairs', in accordance with its 'stance', becomes increasingly ambiguous, the form relates to other (trends in) border genres such as reality television (e.g. historical reality series *The Edwardian Country House* [Channel 4] and *Frontier House* [PBS]), documentary drama and avant-garde film

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Jelle Mast is a PhD candidate and teaching assistant at the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Antwerp. His main research interests are in the areas of documentary and genre theory, genre hybridization, popular factual television and mock-documentary. His PhD dissertation is on the hybrid forms, functions and ethical implications of border genres at the intersection of fiction and non-fiction. *Address*: Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp. [email: jelle.mast@ua.ac.be]