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No Tricks: A Reflexive Ruse
by
Jack T Wotton
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Introduction: A Reflexive Ruse

The Honours studio project, *No Tricks*, is a mockumentary about The Wunderz, an experimental music group, and their tour of Japan.¹ The work is a chronicle of the events that took place on tour, focusing on the banal aspects of touring and all else besides. Questioning the authenticity of filmed events, the work emphasises the veracity of documentary: its authenticity ultimately founders with the multiplicity of points of view, the need to maintain narrative continuity, and the blurred line between testimonial and acting. As such, *No Tricks* is an amalgam of fictional and factual scenes that leave the viewer with an uneasy sense of the oxymoronic “fabrication of truth.” In adumbrating the chief theoretical concerns, the written work reflects on the device of reflexivity through a series of case studies. Chapter one examines how the playwright Pirandello used reflexivity in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), in conjunction with its use in *No Tricks*, to show how meta-theatrical simulation causes an endless reflection between art and life; chapter two discusses the ways in which *No Tricks* can be defined as a mockumentary; chapter three explores how *No Tricks* mimics documentary conventions to reflect on issues of representation. The film theorists Bill Nichols and Alexandra Juhasz, respectively, are cited throughout the written work as their research has led to the discovery of films that have inspired the Honours studio project.

Reflexivity is a device which breaks with art as enchantment. Reflexive works call upon the audience to question what lies beyond the surface of what they are viewing.² The first chapter deals with a unique use of reflexivity in Luigi Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). Pirandello’s use of reflexivity is unique because it is not used solely to talk about theatre as a construction. Many reflexive works highlight the common conventions of their medium to simply reflect their own means of production. One primary example of this approach is found in Dziga Vertov’s film *Man With A Movie Camera* (1921), where the physical

¹ Watch *No Tricks* online here: www.jacktwotton.com

² Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985), xi.

presence of the cameraman emphasises the need for a true picture of labour and therefore honest representation.³ Pirandello was less interested in revealing the life behind theatre but rather the theatre behind life. Thus theatre and life are both a game of simulations. Pirandello shows us that theatre isn't the only place where simulations lie because the very world around us is a game of make-believe.

Mockumentary films reflect the make-believe in documentaries which are meant to account for factual representations of the world. Conventions are mimicked in mockumentaries to bring to the surface the variety of misgivings of the documentary genre. The lies of documentary are mirrored and made visible in mockumentary.⁴ The second chapter discusses the reasons that could classify *No Tricks* as a mockumentary, listing the significant indications in *No Tricks* that self-consciously gives itself away as fiction. In so doing, *No Tricks* comments on the misrepresentation of the Other, the mediation of reality through editing, and the failed project of the documentarian to tell the truth.

The third chapter discusses three conventions that are used reflexively in *No Tricks*. The use of these conventions while reinforcing the mockumentary value of the film, also allows for a better understanding of the complications of filmic representation. Observational footage is the first convention explored in this chapter. The complication of the effect the camera has on its filmed subjects was a major concern of those documentary filmmakers obsessed with phenomenological transparency. The *cinéma vérité* movement in France, followed shortly by its American counterpart, the Direct Cinema movement, both laid heavy emphasis on observational footage as a means of phenomenological transparency. Observational footage is characterised by its non-intervention of film subjects and events. These observational movements had a profound impact on documentary filmmaking and their effects are still felt today. *No Tricks* uses

³ Ibid., 81.

⁴ Alexandra Juhasz, "Introduction: Phony Definitions and Troubling Taxonomies of Fake Documentary" in *F is for Phony*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

the same fly-on-the-wall technique championed by these movements to better understand the relationship between filmmaker and film subject. Narration is the second convention explored in this chapter. The use of voice-over dates back to the first sound films and is one of the oldest conventions of documentary. It is used ironically in *No Tricks* to explore the assumed authority it traditionally holds. The third convention discussed in this chapter is reenactment. Reenactments are the recreations of prior events.⁵ They were used heavily in Robert J. Flaherty's early documentaries described by John Grierson as the "creative dramatisation of actuality."⁶ Because reenactments have a disparate proximity to the event they reconstruct, they are vulnerable to the fabricating hands of the filmmaker. It was Flaherty himself who once said, "sometimes you have to lie."⁷ In the case discussed here reenactment is framed within itself. The people present at the time of the original event reenact the story the way they remember it. This brings about issues of proximity and memory.

This paper concludes with the notion of the impossible story. The Honours studio project is constructed around a reflexive ruse which embodies the idea of the ceaseless tension between fact and fiction. Truth is representable in moving images but cannot be known in them. The closest one can get to a truthful picture of reality is when it is placed in a hall of mirrors.

⁵ Bill Nichols, *Speaking Truths With Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 34.

⁶ Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2013), 233.

⁷ Ibid.

Chapter One: Meta-simulation in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *No Tricks*

Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) is a reflexive play, blurring the boundary between reality and representation. Pirandello's aim is to break the rules of theatre to highlight theatrical verisimilitude. Thus Pirandello also shows that it is impossible to have a firm grasp on what is, and is not, simulated in both theatre and reality. A meta-theatrical simulation is achieved in *Six Characters* by framing simulations within themselves. The effect of mounting frames within frames causes an infinite reflection, a room of mirrors, where art and life become indistinguishable.⁸ Similarly, *No Tricks* adopts Pirandello's use of meta-simulation in a series of reenactment scenes, in which the original reenactment turns back on itself to reveal its own simulation. The way in which meta-simulation is put to use in *Six Characters* will be discussed here in conjunction with *No Tricks*, as well as related examples in film and television that have influenced the Honours studio project.

Six Characters and *No Tricks* both begin with scenes that simulate reality. By setting up a familiar and lifelike appearance of reality, this works to deceive the viewer into thinking what they are seeing is real. *Six Characters* begins with the rehearsal of another Pirandello play, *The Rules of the Game* (1919). The viewer is presented with what could potentially be a real working environment: The Actors are casually dressed and fooling about on stage. The Director walks in from the back of the hall and is met by his assistant with a stack of mail. All the while the sound of The Stage Hand's hammer bangs away in the background.⁹ There is a dimension of realism in this opening scene, as there is in the beginning of *No Tricks*. The film begins with a reenactment of a violent and gruesome fight. The footage is shaky and full of digital grain. With its home video look, reminiscent of Eduardo Sánchez's and Daniel Myrick's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), it appears as if the fight was captured as the event happened. The fight scene has all the qualities of

⁸ Maurizio Grande, "Pirandello and the Theatre-within-the-Theatre: Thresholds and Frames in Ciascuno a suo modo," in *Luigi Pirandello*, ed. Gianpaolo Biasin and Manuela Gieri (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 61.

⁹ Luigi Pirandello, Robert Rietty, *Three plays / Luigi Pirandello ; with an introduction by John Linstrum* (London: Methuen, 1985), 71-72.

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a candid moment caught on film. Before a meta-theatrical simulation comes into play, both works present a believable simulation of real life.

Simulation takes place within what Maurizio Grande calls the game of theatre. Theatrical simulation is a form of make-believe game-play where fiction establishes the boundary between true and false. In Grande's words, "every act is both real, in so far as it is a move in the game, and, at the same time false, if it is assumed to be a real gesture."¹⁰ Actions that are simulated in a game are in essence the same actions that take place in reality outside of games, hence the paradox of game-play. Grande uses boxing in comparison to street fighting as an example, wherein boxing, a blow to an opponent means an entirely different thing from what it would mean in an ad hoc brawl. Both actions take place in real life and in real time, however, the former is governed by rules whereas the latter is not, causing them to be judged by different criteria.¹¹ Simulation is believable so long as it remains constant, uninterrupted. To use a popular example, as soon as Mike Tyson decided to bite the ear off Evander Holyfield in the 1997 WBA Heavyweight championship, he broke the rules, and the simulated nature of the game was ruptured.¹² In other words, the simulation stepped outside its typical framing and entered the real.

Six Characters and *No Tricks* initiate a meta-simulation by breaking the simulation of the first performance. When The Six Characters enter from the back of the hall and walk on stage to address The Acting Company, they interrupt the simulation of reality set up by the fake rehearsal. The phantasmic forms of The Six Characters, who claim to be real and demand their true story to be told, disrupt the dimension of realism established by the first performance.¹³ Similarly in *No Tricks*, the reenactment scene is interrupted by The Wünderz who walk into frame. An off-screen voice yells "cut" and lights turn on to reveal a film set. The Wünderz

¹⁰ Grande, "Pirandello and the Theatre-within-the-Theatre," 54.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Mike Tyson Bite Fight - Evander Holyfield June 28, 1997." Youtube 00:02:20, posted by Boxing Hall of Fame Las Vegas Jun 27, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00sYoLWwFXk>

¹³ Grande, "Pirandello and the Theatre-within-the-Theatre," 57.

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are revealed to be playing the role of their opponents. They begin ordering actors around who are playing The Wunderz in the simulated fight. In both cases simulation is framed within itself to initiate a performance within a performance.

The meta-theatrical simulation in both *Six Characters* and *No Tricks* turns back on to itself to become part of the fiction represented. In *Six Characters* The Acting Company eventually agrees to bring the story of The Six Characters to life in the theatre. To begin with, The Six Characters are asked to reenact the series of events the way they remember them.¹⁴ The rest of the play is centred around dramatising what The Six Characters believe is a true story of their tragic lives. What is initially set up as a meta-theatrical simulation becomes the centre of the dramatic fiction. Similarly in *No Tricks*, The Wunderz, who announce the initial simulation as fiction, begin to perform the reenactment themselves as their doubles look on. Again, as is the case in *Six Characters*, the performers that engaged the meta-simulation in the first place become the centre of another simulation. The centred and decentred fiction causes meta-simulation to oscillate between reality and illusion.

In both *Six Characters* and *No Tricks*, the endless reflection of the ever mobile meta-theatrical simulation causes the boundary between representation and reality to blur. The effect of this reveals how life mirrors art. The reflexivity that transpires from the corporeality of having The Characters on stage, and The Wunderz on-screen, reenacting their own story within a story, is also found in *The Act of Killing* (2012) by Joshua Oppenheimer. Within the documentary Indonesian gangsters make their own movie, reenacting the brutal murders they undertook in the Indonesian Communist Purge of '65. Members of this particular death squad were influenced by American Westerns and Gangster films. In scenes that he directs himself, Anwar Congo, the gang's leader, dresses up as John Wayne. In an interview

¹⁴ Pirandello, *Three Plays*, 99

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he says that he learned how to kill by going to the movies. This is an example of life reflecting art, and also through the film-within-the-film, art reflecting life.¹⁵ There is a poignant moment in a scene where the nephew of a victim of the death squad is forced to play a communist captive in their film. Real tears roll down the man's face as he is fake tortured by the acting gangsters playing themselves.¹⁶ Trauma is both simulated and felt in an endless reflection between representation and reality. Oppenheimer's technique of blurring the boundary between acting and non-acting, by framing one within the other, causes an endless reflection of art and life, indebted to Pirandello's unique form of meta-theatre.

In *Six Characters* and *No Tricks*, fiction is both jeopardised and upheld so there is an illogical continuity between art and life. Grande states that there is no reason to imagine otherwise the game continuing to contain the real audience, who would inevitably become part of the meta-fiction.¹⁷ Considering this notion of the spectator's potential involvement in the infinite reflection of art and life, brings to mind the Japanese reality show *Terrace House: Boys X Girls in the City* (2016). As with *No Tricks* and *Six Characters*, *Terrace House* is a show within a show with performances framed within performances. As a viewer you watch a panel of hosts observe the behaviour of six strangers living in a share house in Tokyo. The panel watch the same performance that the viewer also watches.¹⁸ At this point, before considering the spectatorship of the housemates themselves, meta-simulation has already been established. A feedback loop occurs when members of the house watch episodes of *Terrace House* within the show. They become spectators of not only their own performance, but of the panel watching their performance, who then watch their performance of watching their performance, which inevitably continues to infinity. The same loop is apparent in *Six Characters* where The Actors watch the performance of The Six Characters, who watch the

¹⁵ The Wunderz also base their alter egos on the same anti-hero characters from American Gangster films, which could speculatively be the reason they were involved in a real-life fight in the first place.

¹⁶ "Torture Scene," *The Act of Killing*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer (2012; USA: Kanopy Streaming, (2105), Kanopy Streaming Online

¹⁷ Grande, "Pirandello and the Theatre-within-the-Theatre," 61.

¹⁸ "The Panel," *Terrace House: Boys and Girls in the City*, directed by Masato Maeda (2015; JP: Fuji Television and Netflix, 2015), Netflix Online Streaming

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performance of The Actors (playing The Six Characters). Once again, in *No Tricks*, The Wünderz' doubles watch The Wünderz (playing doubles of their opponents) reenact the fight, who then watch the doubles (playing The Wünderz), and so on into infinity. For the viewer this ceaseless continuation of performances mounted within performances deems it impossible to distinguish where fiction begins and where it ends. Following these examples and coming back to Grande's hypothetical notion of the audiences involvement, the viewer does indeed become a part of the reflection, because the play of mirrors makes life and art indistinguishable from one another.

Reflexivity is not used by Pirandello in *Six Characters* simply to dismantle theatre's devices in order to speak to the theatre, but rather to go beyond the theatre and cross the proscenial threshold which separates art and life.¹⁹ *No Tricks* follows a similar course: it not only attempts to reflect on conventions of film, but rather hopes to capitalise on a Pirandellian approach to meta-simulation which reflects the paradox of simulating reality. Pirandello shows us that the game of make-believe in theatre may be bound by rules, but when those same rules are broken and applied to the make-believe in life, there is no telling what game one is playing.

¹⁹ Grande, "Pirandello and the Theatre-within-the-Theatre," 57.



Figure 1. Remy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde, film still from *Man Bites Dog*, 1992.

Chapter Two: *No Tricks as Mockumentary*

Mockumentaries are semi-fictional films that operate within the documentary genre, reflecting the vulnerability of that genre.²⁰ A primary function of mockumentary is to hand agency back to those misrepresented in documentaries.²¹ *No Tricks* is loaded with indications that point to its fictitiousness, all of which are intended to thwart the viewers' initial cognisance of it as a documentary. These indications, which range from subtle clues to overt allusions, are discussed here in a chronological order to the film. The narrative in *No Tricks* is an allegory of the threat mockumentary poses to the definitive project of documentary's claim to truth.

The opening credits in *No Tricks* is the first significant, albeit subtle, indication of its fictitiousness. Text screens are intercut with scenes of The Wunderz arriving at train stations, of their backstage shenanigans, and footage of the band performing live. The screen freezes on each member of the band with captions with their name. This is a close reconstruction of the same kind of sequence in Rob Reiner's seminal mockumentary, *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), which itself is a reconstruction, and in turn, a parody of the archetypal introduction sequences found in rockumentaries. In *Spinal Tap* the introduction sequence has two functions: first, to establish the environment that the band Spinal Tap operates within, and second to parody the rockumentary form.²² Similar operations are applied in *No Tricks*, however it is also a parody of a parody which functions to address the film's relationship to its mock-rockumentary predecessor in *Spinal Tap*. According to Craig Hight and Jane Roscoe, "parody makes its target a significant part of itself."²³ *No Tricks* does not present a parody of rock n' roll with the same affectation that the band Spinal Tap have toward heavy metal bands, or even The Rutles have to The Beatles (added to the fact that the two lead musicians in Spinal Tap are deliberate pastiches of Lennon and McCartney).²⁴ *No Tricks* makes its parody of *This Is Spinal Tap* primarily

²⁰ Jane Roscoe, Craig Hight, *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 6

²¹ Juhasz, "Introduction," *F is for Phony*, ed. Juhasz and Lerner (2006), 7.

²² Roscoe and Hight, *Faking It*, 123.

²³ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

in homage to Rob Reiner's film, and also to hint at its own mockumentary status.²⁵

A narrative is introduced early on in *No Tricks* by a narrator, which however does not serve to distinguish the film as a documentary or a mockumentary. Narrative as a means of story telling is not solely a mechanism of fiction. Narrative is used in documentary for structural purposes.²⁶ Dubbed over a montage of random tour footage, that follows the opening title in *No Tricks*, the narrator introduces the plot: "The Wünderz caught wind that there was a copycat band in a strange and faraway land who were stealing their look and their sound...so Jacky hired a camera crew and the fellas travelled to this faraway land (Japan) to kick a few shins and find out a bit more about these imwütators." The combination of the absurd premise of the plot and the humour in the pun "imwütators," is intended to give the viewer a clue as to the film's mock value. In any case, at this point the narrative is intended to give the viewer a purpose to watch on, and also to keep the film structurally upright as a documentary, at least before it slips into total ridiculousness.²⁷

The element of magic realism in *No Tricks* is perhaps the most obvious clue that the film is a fake documentary. The Wünderz, having played a number of shows, and having no luck gathering leads on their copycats' whereabouts, finally cross paths with an invaluable informant, who the narrator calls "The Osaka Witch Doctor." She agrees to supply information through telepathy on the exact location of the copycat band under one condition, that The Wünderz do them no harm. Up until this point the world depicted in *No Tricks* is relatively mundane. The Wünderz are shown doing what everyone does on holiday in Japan. They shop for presents for their girlfriends, they go to sentos together, and they eat unusual breakfasts.²⁸ The banal realism is intended to allow the viewer to identify with the subjects,

²⁵ There are a number of references to *This is Spinal Tap*, that would be too lengthy and not exactly relevant to the argument laid forth in this chapter. For example, both Spinal Tap and The Wünderz are fictitious bands in their respective films however they exist outside their texts as real bands. The Wünderz are inspired to go to Japan because that is where Spinal Tap find success

²⁶ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 6.

²⁷ The pun "imwütaton" is one of many puns made by the narrator, who by keeping them consistent throughout the film, serves to form his own language, helping to build on the perception of an imaginary world that mockumentaries rely upon establishing.

²⁸ Japanese word for public bath

and amounts to contrast the phantasmatic element of *The Osaka Witch Doctor*.²⁹ This pushes the narrative towards shaky territory in terms of believability. Jacky is shown in a trance like state staring at the stage where *The Osaka Witch Doctor* is surrounded by synthesizers and doll heads, as she recites poetry over bizarre Velvet Underground-esque music. The narrator explains that at this moment *The Osaka Witch Doctor* gave Jacky the information of the copycats' whereabouts. This outlandish moment is intended to invoke scepticism within the viewer of *No Tricks'* factuality.

Besides hinting to its own fictitiousness, *The Osaka Witch Doctor* scene in *No Tricks* intends to comment on the portrayal of the Other in ethnographic documentary. Characters who are not The Wünderz are cast as Others, that is as denizens of the "faraway land." The Wünderz represent white male explorers who deal with exotic subjects in an uncanny, perilous environment. In a similar vein, the great patriarch of documentary, Robert J. Flaherty, is renowned for portraying his subjects in a primitive light. In the infamous film *Nanook of the North* (1921), Flaherty depicts Inuits in the arctic circle as primitive and archaic. The protagonist Nanook and his family are shown hunting with spears and travelling in canoes, where in reality they hunted with guns and drove motor vehicles.³⁰ Analogously, in *No Tricks*, the narrator calls Japan "a strange faraway land," and labels an eccentric Japanese performer a "witch doctor," who in real life is a woman who merely plays strange music. This colouring of the facts is intended to amount to a satire of the stereotypes cast in ethnographic films, which strip their subjects of the right to represent themselves.³¹

The clearest indication that *No Tricks* is fictitious occurs when The Wünderz find their copycats at a Country and Western bar outside of Osaka. The Wünderz are shown in the crowd watching their doppelgängers onstage performing in cowboy

²⁹ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 171.

³⁰ Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy* (2013), 233.

³¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When The Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York:Routledge, 1991), 148.

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costumes (see figure. 1 and figure. 2). Real footage of The Wunderz performing live is spliced with footage of The Wunderz off-stage watching another act perform. This shoddy fabrication of real events to create a fake event is intended to comment on the documentary filmmaker's mediation of reality through the inevitable editing process.



Figure 2. Jack T Wotton, film still from *No Tricks*, 2017.

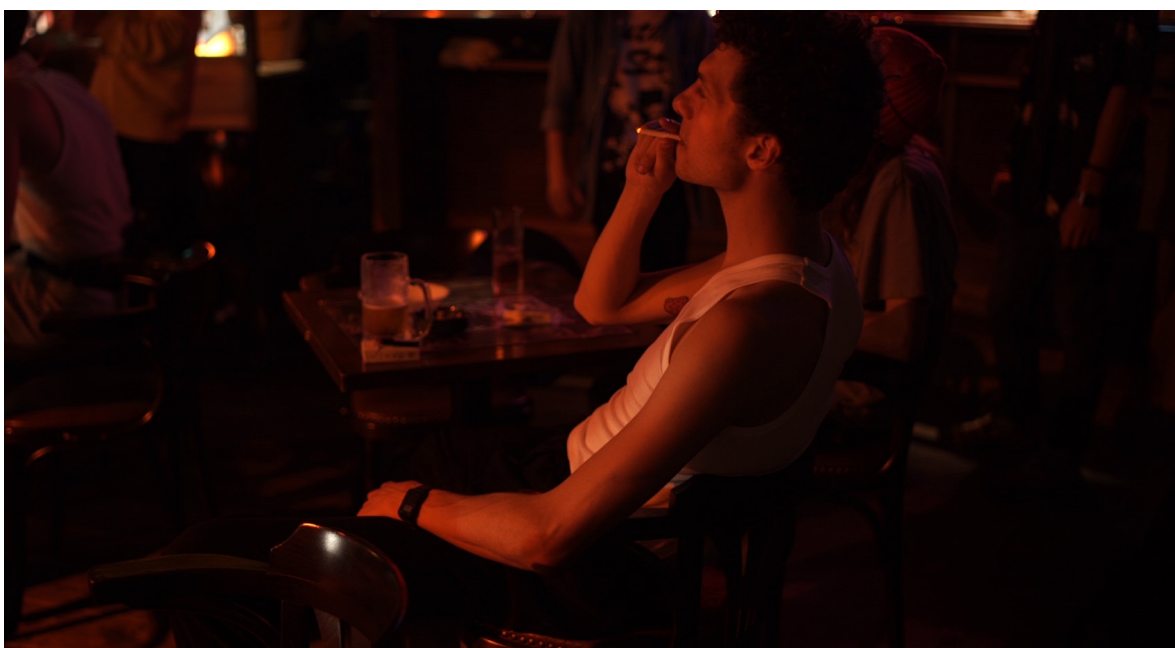


Figure 2. Jack T Wotton, film still from *No Tricks*, 2017.

D.A. Pennebaker, champion of the Direct Cinema movement, and responsible for the classic rockumentaries, *Monterey Pop* (1968), and *Don't Look Back* (1967), gives testimony that his mediation of raw footage in the editing process of both films stayed true to reality. Pennebaker claims that he constructed his films as close to how he perceived the events took place.³² This is a key justification for rockumentary filmmakers who insist upon their accurate portrayal of performers and deny that they are involved in the construction of rock myths.³³ *No Tricks* shows how easily editing can construct fallacious situations, and therefore rock mythologies, however real or uncanny they may be.

A significant proportion of mockumentaries have a narrative, which centres around the failure of its subjects to fulfil the expectations they and their documenters set up for themselves. *David Holzman's Diary* (1967) follows a week in the life of its protagonist, and faux-director, David, as he tries and fails at understanding life through the camera.³⁴ *This Is Spinal Tap* follows the failed project of Marty DiBergi, the film's fictional documentarian, to capture Spinal Tap in all of their glory, as they plummet to the status of has-beens.³⁵ *Man Bites Dog* (1992) follows the downward spiral of the serial killer Benoit, and the film crew who become part of his heinous crimes, before they are all eventually brutally murdered themselves.³⁶ All of these mockumentary films serve to critique the objective of the documentarian to tell their intended story.³⁷

No Tricks reflects this notion of the filmmaker's failure. A reenacted fight scene³⁸ between The Wunderz and their copycats takes place immediately after the Country bar scene. The Osaka Witch Doctor casts a hex upon The Wunderz for breaking the promise they had to not hurt their copycats. This hex ultimately

³² Roscoe and Hight, *Faking It*, 120.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *David Holzman's Diary*, directed by Jim McBride (1967; USA: Second Run DVD, 2006), DVD.

³⁵ *This is Spinal Tap*, directed by Rob Reiner (1984; Los Angeles, California: MGM Home Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

³⁶ *Man Bites Dog: It Happened In Your Neighbourhood*, directed by Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde (1992; Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2002), DVD.

³⁷ Juhasz, "Introduction," *F is for Phony*, ed. Juhasz and Lerner 12.

³⁸ The Wunderz defeating their doubles is a direct reference to the scene in *Man Bites Dog* where Benoit and the film crew find and kill another serial killer who is also followed around by a film crew.

leads to the failure of the rest of their tour and The Wunderz's fall from grace: Jacky loses his prized red suit, members of the Wunderz lose their sanity, and people stop coming to their shows. In this story The Wunderz represent documentarians who are obsessively driven to uphold the truth, and who define themselves as the real storytellers. The copycats represent the mockumentarian, who through mimicry, subvert cut in stone narratives of documentary. The Witch Doctor represents the voiceless Other. She is an ally of the copycats (representing mockumentarians), and seeks revenge on The Wunderz (representing documentarians) for the disrespect they show even after she grants them access into her world. The plot serves as an allegory for the doomed project of documentary to claim truth, and the power of fake documentary to subvert and give voice to the Other. In Alexandra Juhasz's words "fake documentaries do and undo the documentary form."³⁹ *No Tricks* makes no attempts to untangle the knots that over time documentary has tied for itself, but rather to resemble that problematic birds nest it has found itself in.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

Chapter Three: Reflexivity in *No Tricks*

In its portrayal of The Wünderz' tour of Japan, *No Tricks* mimics three documentary conventions reflexively to explore issues of representation. The film is constructed around the use of these conventions. The first convention follows the use of observational footage, which constitutes the factual aspects of the film. The majority of the film is comprised of *cinéma vérité*-style footage, which stands for a record of the events as they unfold before the camera. This fly-on-the-wall style typically suggests a straightforward representation of facts. Through the mimicry of observational film, this approach highlights the relationship between the camera and its subject, an issue reflected upon in early *vérité* style films. The second convention used is direct address, which constitutes the more fictional aspect of the film. The viewer is guided by a voice-over, however, the situations that the narrator describes do not match the content that is presented, and therefore comes off as ironic. In other words, the authority the author assumes to have is dissonant with what actually transpires. The third convention is reenactment, which treads the line between fact and fiction. Reenactment is framed within itself to explore the agency given to the reenactor to tell his own story, and what effect proximity to the event has on the representation of history.

No Tricks mimics an observational style, making it reflexive of the relationship between the film camera and film subject. In a majority of scenes the camera follows closely behind members of the band, filming them as they walk through different Japanese cities. Ostensibly such moments seem to be filmed with a neutral eye, providing an unbiased account of The Wünderz' reality. For the most part, the subjects acts as if unaware of being filmed. Thomas Waugh, in a discussion on Joris Ivens, a predecessor of the French *cinéma vérité* movement, explains that a subject's perceived lack of awareness before a rolling camera is a premeditated action, and inextricably linked to observational cinema practice.⁴⁰ This in turn calls

⁴⁰ Thomas Waugh, "Acting To Play Oneself: Notes On Performance In Documentary," in *The Documentary Film Reader*, ed. by Jonathon Kahana (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 818.

into the question the passivity and veracity of the filmmaker's eye. According to retrospective accounts from the directors themselves, many events in the flagship cinema vérité film, *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, are provoked rather than passively recorded.⁴¹ In the fake documentary series *The Office* (2001), which mimics the observational style, the presence of the camera crew provokes self-conscious reactions from the staff, whereas the boss, David Brent, does all he can to absorb the camera's attention, relishing in the limelight.⁴² The same can be said for *No Tricks* inasmuch as the presence of the camera changes the subjects behaviour and in effect the reality that is represented.

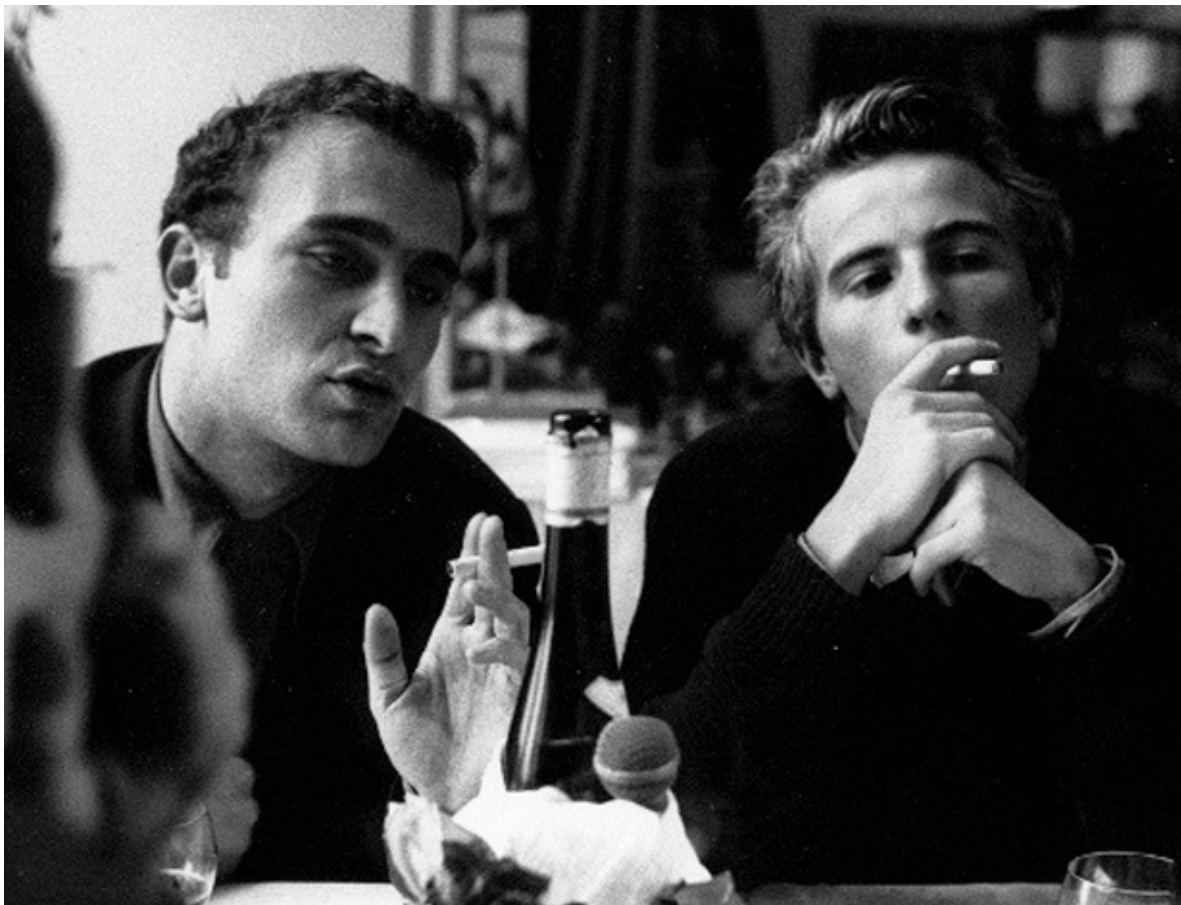


Figure 4. Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin, film still from *Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961.

⁴¹ Sam Dilorio, "Total cinema: Chronique d'un été and the end of Bazinian film theory," *Film & Television Literature Index* 48, no. 1 (2007): 30. doi:10.1093/screen/hjm002

⁴² Juhasz, "Introduction," *F is for Phony*, ed. Juhasz and Lerner, 3.

Situations that are recorded on film can capture candid responses from the film's subjects, but only within the parameters of the performance that the presence of a rolling camera inherently provokes. In *David Holzman's Diary*, a mockumentary reflexive of observational cinema, the filmmaker Jim McBride critiques the project of the vérité filmmaker to capture a real picture of its subjects. McBride's criticism is expressed through the character, Pepe, who protests David's project to represent things as they are.⁴³ In one scene Pepe yells at David, "as soon as you start filming something, it's not reality anymore."⁴⁴ In the film *Derrida* (2002), shot fly-on-the-wall style, an interviewer off-screen asks Derrida what it is like having his every day life filmed. In response Derrida states that his behaviour changes, saying: "you are only seeing me as I am before the camera."⁴⁵ The most notable example of this notion occurs in a later scene where he and his wife, Marguerite, are having drinks with old friends, talking quite openly to the people on and off-screen. One of the off-screen voices asks Derrida and Marguerite how they met, to which they both freeze up and coyly respond with only a short answer. Later in the film, Derrida is shown viewing rushes of this scene and comments that he liked their reaction, that they closed up and decided to withhold that information.⁴⁶ Early vérité filmmakers such as Rouch and Morin were not naive to the effect the camera had on its subject's behaviour, if anything this was of profound interest. The paradox of their approach however, is that they strived for a phenomenologically transparent representation of reality, yet knew full well that the very apparatus required to provide this window influenced the situations it recorded.⁴⁷ Through mimicry, *No Tricks* reflects the predilection of observational cinema for representing film subjects without influencing their behaviour, which in effect changes the situation represented. Therefore, by the

⁴³ Sharon L. Zuber, "David Holzman's diary: a critique of direct cinema," *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 28, no 3. (2009): 35-36, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://ezproxy.library.usyd.edu.au/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/docview/232161066?accountid=14757>

⁴⁴ "Pepe," *David Holzman's Diary*, directed by Jim McBride (1967; USA: Second Run DVD, 2006), DVD.

⁴⁵ "Derrida and Friends," *Derrida*, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering. (2002; USA: Zeitgeist Films, 2004), DVD.

⁴⁶ "Interview scene," *Derrida*, directed by Dick and Ziering. (2002; USA: Zeitgeist Films, 2004), DVD.

⁴⁷ Dilorio, "Total cinema," 28.

very use of a camera, the filmmaker ultimately controls the narrative that is strung together by observational footage.

Through the use of ironic direct address, *No Tricks* is reflexive of the authority of the narrator and what effect irony has on the relationship between filmmaker and viewer. The voice-over in documentary guides the viewer by speaking directly to them, setting up a level of intimacy, providing a singular and quite persuasive perspective on the subject of the film.⁴⁸ In *No Tricks* a smooth-toned Los Angeles male narrates over tracking shots of Japanese scenery. Events and situations are laid out for the viewer in poetic detail, and the familiarity of the narrator's voice, recognisably allusive of Hollywood films, allows for the information to be easily digested.

Louis De Rochemont's, *The March of Time*, a monthly film magazine that ran from 1935-1951, is remembered for the booming voice of its narrator and is cited as an early example of the role a narrator typically takes up as teacher of history.⁴⁹ In film theory narration has often been criticised as an easy way out for the filmmaker to get their message across. Direct Cinema pioneer Robert Drew states that "narration is what you do when you fail."⁵⁰ For those self described upholders of cinema truth like Drew, this may be the case, however the idea that narration has authority over the viewer, and does indeed get a message across, is worth exploring.

No Tricks uses narration to examine how it can be used with irony to deliver an accurate message. As well as describing things as they appear on-screen, at points the narrator describes the opposite of what the situations on-screen visually represent. The most significant instance of this occurs in one scene when the narrator says, "The Wünderz like to dress up real nice for special occasions when they sell out a show." Subsequently The Wünderz are shown on stage delivering

⁴⁸ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary : A Critical Introduction* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2006), 49

⁴⁹ Ibid..

⁵⁰ Robert Drew, "Narration Can Be a Killer," in *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, ed. Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 271.

a high-energy performance, then the camera pans to a crowd of fewer than ten people, most of which are working behind the bar. The disjunction between voice and image has an ironic effect. The narrator says that The Wunderz sold out their shows but this is clearly not the case. The crowd is abysmal, the setting far from auspicious let alone encouraging. The discord between voice and image is a direct reference to a scene in *Hôtel des Invalides* (1952), a film tour of the Musée de l'Armée in the Invalides in Paris. The camera closes up on objects around the museum and the narrator introduces "the bronzed head of General Mangin's statue." As the sentence finishes the camera pans to reveal half of the bronzed head blown away.⁵¹ With its dry irony, this moment in the film has been read as an anti-war sentiment, despite the film being commissioned by the French Ministry of War. The filmmaker, Georges Franju, had other ideas. Knowing the power of the voice-over, Franju adopted a subtle course of subversion through ironic juxtaposition.

While narration gives the filmmaker a special opportunity to express his perspective, if reenactment is reflexively framed within itself, the power can shift from filmmaker to film subject. There is one scene in *No Tricks* that exemplifies this shift. Members of The Wunderz recount the reconstruction of a violent conflict in which they were involved while they were out celebrating in Golden Gai, Tokyo. The Wunderz are shown directing a cast of actors to reenact the event the way they themselves remember it.⁵² This scene is a direct reference to Pierre Huyghe's film *Third Memory* (2000), based on John Wojtowicz failed bank robbery of a Chase Manhattan Bank in 1972, made famous by the hollywood feature *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). In *Third Memory*, Wojtowicz is depicted on-screen directing a crew of actors to reenact the robbery the way he remembers it, which naturally differs dramatically from the Hollywood version.⁵³ Another example is explored in Mike Figgis' film, *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), based on a reenactment of

⁵¹ Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 49.

⁵² This real event that took place in Golden Gai is what the reenacted fight between The Wunderz and their doubles is based on. For the purpose of the argument in this passage, the real event is referred to.

⁵³ Ruth Erickson, "The Real Movie: Reenactment, Spectacle, and Recovery in Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory*," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 50, no. 1 (2009): 107, accessed Jun 8, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/stable/41552542>.

the famous conflict between police officers and striking miners at a coking plant outside of Sheffield in 1984 during a Thatcher era industrial dispute. Much like *Third Memory*, original participants of the miners strike are involved in the reenactment and are handed a voice in the retelling of events, which differs from the way they were originally portrayed by the BBC at the time.⁵⁴ In the case of *No Tricks*, *Third Memory*, and *The Battle of Orgreave*, power is handed back to the subject to tell his own story.

The shift of the storyteller's voice from filmmaker to film subject may give agency back to the original subjects, however, when a reenactment is represented for what it is, namely a reenactment, the issue of proximity arises. Proximity is a concept used in Bill Nichols analysis of reenactment, which stands for the problematic gap between the real event and its representation.⁵⁵ For instance, if *No Tricks* hypothetically contained footage of the fight in Golden Gai, it would be assumed that the filmmaker was present at the time, and the images would be of a different order from those that are of a conventional reenactment. Moreover, Nichols states that reenacted scenes are rendered with the same indexical fidelity as actual scenes captured at the time they occurred. In this case, The Wunderz's reenactment of their fight is tied closer to the present than the past event it intends to represent. Although the viewer is made aware of a device that would normally disguise its disconnection from the original event, its link to the present grounds it as fiction. In Ivone Margulies' words, "the fiction of the reenactment originates in its inherent separation from the event that inspired it."⁵⁶ The time between Wojowitz's reenactment and the day the actual bank robbery took place amounts to a separation of twenty-eight years.⁵⁷ As for *The Battle of Orgreave*, the gap between the bloody conflict in Sheffield and its reconstruction is seventeen years. In both cases a large proportion of time stands between history and its reenacted referent.

⁵⁴ Paul Ward, *The Margins of Reality*, (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), 51.

⁵⁵ Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 4

⁵⁶ Erickson, "The Real Movie," 107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Although The Wunderz are given agency to tell their version of the fight story the indexical link to history is only tied to the reenactment itself and not the event it represents. In this light The Wunderz reenactment can be read as fiction, which in any case locates The Wunderz' story as questionable and suspicious.

As a whole, *No Tricks* is constructed around the use of documentary conventions to reflect on the effect they can have on the way a story is told. Such conventions are more commonly used in documentaries that are not reflexive of issues that arise from their use. The popular films *Dogtown and Z Boys* (2011), *Anne Frank Remembered* (1995), or the docu-series *The Civil War* (1990) also come to mind. Although they cover vastly different topics, observational footage, persuasive voice-over, and reenactment are used to carry their narrative, and through this kind of storytelling become quite believable. As such, *No Tricks* belongs to the category of reflexive films which concern themselves with the problems that come out of representing an authentic image of reality.



Figure 5. Jim McBride, film still from *David Holzmans Diary*, 1967.

Conclusion: An Impossible Story

Poets tell how Pancho fell,
 Lefty's living in a cheap motel.
 Desert's quiet and Cleveland's cold,
 Or so the story ends are told.
 Pancho needs your prayers its true,
 Save a few for Lefty too.
 Just doing what he had to do.
 Now he's growing old.
 A few old grey federale say,
 They could have had him any day.
 They only let him go so wrong,
 Out of kindness I suppose.⁵⁸
 -Townes Van Zandt

So the late great Townes Van Zandt sings in the last verse of *Pancho and Lefty*. The song follows the story of a young dreamer named Pancho who leaves his mother's home to join a gang of bandits. He's soon shot to death in a duel in the Mexican desert by another gunman called Lefty. Lefty gets away with murder but lives the rest of his life on the run and in guilt for taking Pancho's life. Or, at least as Van Zandt sings, that is how the poets tell the story. The narrative is engaging and emotionally moving with effects which operate to teach us to be perceptive and empathetic. The way it is framed within itself makes it reflexive, which also teaches us to question the truth in stories.

Pancho and Lefty is relevant to this paper because of its telling of an impossible story. Van Zandt sings in the earlier verse that when Pancho was shot in the desert there was "no one to hear his dying words." This begs the question

⁵⁸ Townes Van Zandt, *Pancho and Lefty* (New York: Tomato Records, 1972) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zprRZ2wFQD4>

Conclusion: An Impossible Story

then, who was there to report on his unheard dying words? Someone had to have made this part of the story up.⁵⁹ Who would really know what happened on The Wunderz' tour of Japan except for those who were there? No matter what film was made about it, the very act of representing already distorts the facts. The film could have been comprised entirely of reenactments. Or, it could have been shot completely fly-on-the-wall with meticulous attention to non-intervention. Or, it could have been one long interview with The Wunderz themselves recounting the events. It does not matter, as soon as a decision is made to represent events, a story is constructed. Jean-Paul Sartre expresses a warning through Roquentin's diary entries in *La Nausee* (1938), "This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story."⁶⁰ If Sartre tells us that storytelling is inescapable than Pirandello shows us that all representation and all reality hides in a room of mirrors. Art reflects life as much as life reflects art in an endless oscillation, making the determination of truth in a story impossible.

No Tricks tells a story about the make-believe. In making a film about The Wunderz' tour of Japan there was the option to stay as true to the facts as possible. The problem with this approach is that if the tour was shown for what it really was, then it would have made for a boring film. To watch the tour in a truthful light would be uninteresting and meaningless. The world doesn't need another rockumentary, let alone another indie band's tour diary, to lead more aspiring youths down the yellow brick road. That's why a decision was made to tell a quixotic story. All documentaries tell stories, but documentaries claim to tell the truth. Here lies the paradox. This very contradiction of telling a story, whilst telling the truth, is something *No Tricks* attempts to mock.

⁵⁹ To add to the confusion of which story to believe, in the film *Heartworn Highways* (1976) by James Szalapski, Townes Van Zandt explains that he wrote the song two weeks before he saw the story on TV.

⁶⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 60.

It is not the job of the artist to tell the truth necessarily. An artist can make it his or her virtue to find Truth or the essence in things by lying.⁶¹ In the case of *No tricks* the decision was made to not tell the truth, to not show the tour for what it really was. To not show the endless trains, the endless drinking, the endless shows with no one at them. Although it does incorporate some of this banality, it only does this to counteract the more fantastical moments in the film which point to itself as a story. The documentarian has a responsibility in getting at the truth, or at least opening up a space where one can investigate what is true and what is not. The mockumentary form does educate the viewer in smarter viewing, in revealing how documentaries can trick, but this is not necessarily the intention of *No Tricks*. The Honours studio project serves as a step towards a larger project to investigate ways of story telling. To understand how to tell a story. And to understand the various responsibilities the filmmaker has to the audience, the subjects, and oneself. Depending on what story you want to tell, you can lie and trick. The intention here is to lie and trick, to one day be able to show through a larger body of work, how all things lie and trick. As Van Zandt sings, the poets have told the story of Pancho and Lefty, but even he himself as a story teller has doubt. I plan to be a storyteller who holds a sense of doubt toward the stories i encounter and to instil a similar doubt in the stories I tell.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Cowling, *Pablo Picasso, Picasso: Style and Meaning* (London; New York: Phaidon, 2002), 87.

Figure 1. Remy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde,
film still from *Man Bites Dog*, 1992.

<https://www.furiousscinema.com/crimewatch-man-bites-dog/>

Figure 2. Jack T Wotton, film still from *No Tricks*, 2017,

(Image provided by Jack T Wotton)

Figure 3. Jack T Wotton, film Still from *No Tricks*, 2017.

(Image provided by Jack T Wotton)

Figure 4. Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin, film still from *Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961,

<https://www.documentary.org/column/playback-jean-rouch-and-edgarmorins-chronicle-summer>

Figure 5. Jim McBride, film still from *David Holzmans Diary*, 1967,

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Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney

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Jack T Wotton Ruse by A Reflexive No Tricks: