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Constructing Authority in the Documentary: Film History in *Forgotten Silver* (1995)

The subject of my presentation is a fake documentary film called *Forgotten Silver*, which was directed by two New Zealand filmmakers, Peter Jackson and Costa Botes. I don’t know whether or not there are any Peter Jackson fans in the audience, but I have to warn you that I’m going to approach this film as a particular kind of fake documentary—and not primarily as a movie in the oeuvre of Peter Jackson. Although I will let you know that *Forgotten Silver* was broadcast on New Zealand television in 1995; obviously, this puts it pre-*Lord of the Rings* (2001), shortly after *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), and right before *The Frighteners* (1996).

One of the main reasons I’m interested in this film is that it was actively foisted upon the New Zealand TV-viewing public as a real documentary. I use the term *actively* because it was screened without any labeling as a fake; there was no mention before the film, and no revelation in the end credits. And, in fact, there was pre-screening media hype heralding *Forgotten Silver* as a new and important documentary film. The New Zealand weekly magazine *The Listener* was in on the joke, running an article that actively promoted the film as a noteworthy documentary (Welch 31-32). The film became controversial in New Zealand because many viewers were fooled, and ‘read’ *Forgotten Silver* as an authentic documentary. In the few days to month after the film was exposed as a deception, viewers expressed dismay in letters to the editor of various New Zealand publications, as well as calls to the TV station.

The film begins with Peter Jackson's discovery of old film reels in cans in a neighbor's garden shed, and it goes on to tell the story of the maker of those films, Colin McKenzie, an early film pioneer, who, if the film is to be believed, actually should be credited with many of the 'firsts' in the history of early cinema, firsts both technical and formal. Among those firsts:

- in 1901, using steam power to drive a film projector;

- in 1901, using a bicycle to power a camera (that would otherwise have been hand-cranked) and simultaneously developing the first tracking shot;

- in 1901, using egg whites to create film stock and being caught for stealing 2000 dozen eggs;

- in 1903, being on the scene to capture historic footage of the first flight of Richard Pearse of New Zealand (rival of the Wright Brothers of the United States), nine months before the Wright Brothers' flight in North Carolina;

- in 1905, creating the first feature-length film, *The Warrior Season*;

- in 1905, developing a sound process for *The Warrior Season*, but the warriors were Chinese, and were speaking Chinese, and McKenzie didn't think of subtitles at that point, so the film flopped commercially;

- in 1911, using a particular type of berry from Tahiti to create a color film process. But in the test film, McKenzie inadvertently captured naked Tahitian women bathing. When he screened the film back home in New Zealand for potential investors, he was brought up on smut charges;

- in 1911, developing the close-up when he fell in love with the leading lady in his biblical film epic *Salome* and kept moving closer and closer to her with the camera;

--in the 1920s, working with a slapstick comedian, Stan the Man, who created physical comedy out of ‘violence against the innocent’—pies in the face, knocking unsuspecting citizens into fountains. Stan the Man unknowingly made the Prime Minister the victim of his comic antics and was severely beaten by the police, which McKenzie caught on camera in what the film called a clear “precursor to the Rodney King incident.”

All of this, when put together in a quick list, sounds funny, absurd, and pretty hard to believe. However, when presented in Jackson and Botes’ “documentary,” it’s not hard to believe—if you are not forewarned that it’s a fake. The question I’m intrigued by is *why*? What are the factors that lead viewers to buy into the narrative and to bond with Colin McKenzie? The viewers I am talking about come in three main types: 1) A number of New Zealand TV viewers in 1995, some of whom made calls to the TV station and newspapers, others wrote letters to local newspapers, and some newspaper columnists who were taken in and who wrote about the experience. 2) Viewers who have since seen the film without being warned it is fake—and who have posted their comments on websites such as amazon.com. 3) Students in my undergraduate classes over the years, only one or two of whom have not been completely fooled.

My analysis of the film, of viewers’ published responses to it, and of the filmmakers’ comments and expectations suggest that there are several factors that contributed to *Forgotten Silvers*’ believability. First and foremost, Jackson and Botes did a brilliant job of evoking the conventions of the historical documentary form—and significantly, never in the film did they break the form. We, as viewers, expect the ‘truth’ in documentary films to be appropriately clothed, and Jackson and Botes followed the rules (faked the standards) of the historical documentary format. In several sections of the film, they pushed the filmed content far—but not far enough to break the trust in the authority they had already established. Second, with this film,

the filmmakers take advantage of the status of the TV audience which is, frankly, vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation, especially from a trusted source. Some duped viewers were so angry precisely because *Forgotten Silver* exposed that vulnerability.

I want to show you the first few minutes of this film. Now, you and I know this is a fake documentary, and we are not going to be able to entirely put ourselves in the frame of mind of someone who has read in a magazine about this documentary on a forgotten early New Zealand filmmaker whose work had recently been rediscovered. And who is viewing this as real. What it will show us is some of the techniques the filmmakers have used to establish a sense of authority in this documentary. We will also see how they position this as a film about a rediscovery of an important early New Zealand filmmaker, one who should be viewed as a national hero. The frame is this: you viewers may not have known about him, but that's because his film work was lost to us. Now it has been found. (Show clip: opening and first scenes of the film.)

In this sequence, you will notice a few things. First, a hand-held camera has been used to follow Jackson on his discovery; it's a re-enactment, but it is exactly the type of re-enactment that is commonly used in documentary films. Some reviewers have noted that Jackson is literally leading viewers down the garden path in this scene (Davis). There is the use of a camera shutter sound and what appear to be documentary photographic stills of the chest in which the important films were stored all these years. Crucially, this discovery piece is followed by a series of interviews with people we recognize as authorities, talking with conviction about the historical import of this find. Among them are Leonard Maltin and Harvey Weinstein, and the film will go on to include interviews with New Zealand actor Sam Neill, filmmakers Jackson and Botes, and a man identified as a film archivist. The film will also include on-camera interviews

with Hannah McKenzie (who is really an actress playing Colin McKenzie's widow.) So Jackson and Botes have also included the requisite, or the obligatory, interview with the surviving family members of this great person, something we as viewers have grown to expect in historical TV documentaries and biographies.

This opening is significant because it establishes the frame through which the events and the inventions of Colin McKenzie will be viewed. These are techniques that bind viewers into the story, manage their impressions of McKenzie, and provide the context—the rediscovery of McKenzie's work and recognized authorities stating how very important this all is. Just when I ended that clip, you began to see some of the other ways in which Jackson and Botes utilized the conventions of the historical documentary format. We heard the disembodied but authoritative voice-over narration done by an older male with a distinguished accent. Also, music in the soundtrack is used to evoke a generic historical period (late 1800s to early 1900s.)

In addition, Jackson and Botes use 'archival' material to tell the story of Colin McKenzie's childhood, early films, inventions, and financial woes. Some of these materials are vintage black-and-white photographs purporting to be shots of Colin's family or of him later in life. Colin was supposed to have been born in 1888 and the period represented in the film is from 1900 up until about 1931. In actuality, some of those vintage black-and-white photographs were real documents—but documents of one of the directors' ancestors in the late 1800s. These were presented in the film as proof, as historical documentation of Colin McKenzie's family at around the same time. Other 'vintage' photographs were completely faked and staged so the actor who played Colin McKenzie (Thomas Robins) was costumed and posed along with other actors playing his brother and the leading lady of *Salome* Maybelle. In interviews about *Forgotten Silver*, Jackson and Botes have mentioned their strategy in selecting actors, which was

basically to pick talent that was not particularly well-known in New Zealand (or elsewhere) so that they would not be immediately recognized by the audience (Botes *Behind the Bull*).

Costa Botes describes their strategy as “interweaving our fiction with real historical fact” (*Behind the Bull*). In other words, the strategy was to give the audience some things that are consistent with what they already know to be true, in order to make the narrative in the fake documentary more convincing. There are a few ways in which that comes out in the film: the use of real historical photographs or footage as B-roll, to establish a particular time period or place in New Zealand. Also, there was the use of the same to portray a real historical event that Colin McKenzie supposedly was connected to or was involved in. In this film, two of these events were the WWI battle at Gallipoli (1915) and later, the Spanish Civil War (1936).

Jackson and Botes also tapped into an important real national story in New Zealand, the early flight experiments of Richard Pearse. In the film, they claim that McKenzie, at fifteen years old, shot film footage of Pearse’s historic flight. In reality, Jackson and Botes created fake film footage of the event—but by using real eyewitness account of the event in order to fake it authentically. So, they faked the event in a way that was consistent with the known historical record, imitating what the flying machine looked like, and that it flew about 200 yards before it crashed (*Behind the Bull*). Jackson and Botes invented three things here: the existence of film footage documenting the flight; that Colin McKenzie was the filmmaker; and they took it one step further still. In the real historical record of Pearse’s flight, the one thing that eyewitnesses don’t agree on was the date at which the flight occurred. Jackson and Botes “fixed” that, by constructing a story in which McKenzie inadvertently captured in his film a newspaper sticking out of the back pocket of a witness to the flight. The newspaper was not detailed enough to be able to read it in McKenzie’s film, but through the technological magic of 1990s digital imaging

and enhancement, Jackson and Botes claim to have verified the date of the flight— March 31, 1903. This was early enough to beat the Wright Brothers of North Carolina. (Show the clip: Pearse’s historic flight.)

I want to make two points here. First, Jackson and Botes faked McKenzie’s films in a way that attempted to match the tonal quality, exposure quality, speed of the film, and framing of that period in early filmmaking. So, they first studied the silent films of that era, and then tried to replicate the technical and stylistic “look” of the times. Then, they aged the film by dragging it around on the floor in the processing lab, as well as through liquid spills in the basement (Botes *Behind the Bull*). Second, fake newspapers and headlines are used throughout the film. In addition to the one in the bystander’s pocket, there were newspaper headlines purporting to document “Smut charged filed” after the Tahitian color film and “2000 dozen eggs stolen” during McKenzie’s film stock experimentation phase.

A critical factor that enables *Forgotten Silver* to become a convincing presentation is that through the 53 minute film, Jackson and Botes do not break the form and format. There is no break with conventions, and so no invitation for viewers to stop, say no, and try to peer into the backstage of this film. Even though some elements of the film’s content get pushed toward the hard-to-believe, everything stays in the tight historical documentary frame that was established at the outset. Two newspaper columnists have written about their viewing experiences which describe this phenomenon, a viewer who starts to question the content, but then is pulled back into the story and frame:

To say I was shattered was an understatement! Not only because I was bitterly disappointed that there was no handsome young hero at all, or a grieving widow, but because I had been completely sucked in.

True, I did wonder about the 200 dozen eggs, and the fact that none of the descendants of the massive army of film extras ever claimed that grandma was once a seductive dancer and grandpa a Roman soldier. There was also the fact that no tramper or hunter had ever stumbled upon the impressive set for *Salome*.

But I wanted to believe this marvelous story of ingenuity, courage and tragedy so much that I pushed such churlish ideas away.

I was later immensely cheered to find I was not the only so-called intelligent victim of this cruel hoax. My daughter and son-in-law, with four degrees and highly responsible positions between them, a high-ranking retired police officer, a deputy headmistress and an ex-hospital matron puffing next to me at the heated pool all believed it was true (Smith “Gullible Viewers Caught up in Act”).

I was annoyed because there were so many episodes in the show that made me think, “This can’t be right, I’m sure I would’ve heard or read of this before.”

Checking with others who viewed the work of the ‘forgotten genius,’ early New Zealand film maker Colin McKenzie, many were of the same mind....

...As McKenzie’s amazing story unraveled. I kept thinking that I was watching the most exciting piece of New Zealand television ever made and upon reflection, maybe I am near right (Mahoney “Forgotten Silver a Delicious Hoax”).

The end of the film keeps with the illusion. A search in the jungle-esque forest of western New Zealand leads to Jackson and Botes’ discovery of a huge set for *Salome*, Colin McKenzie’s biblical epic film. They find his raw footage in a vault there, and we see the restoration and editing process of these reels. We also see, supposedly, the audience at the film premiere of *Salome* giving a standing ovation at the end of the screening. In other words, the

viewers of *Forgotten Silver* are shown other New Zealanders who are responding to this rediscovery with applause and celebration. Jackson and Botes have created a complete package.

The last point I want to make is that *Forgotten Silver*, if we consider the film itself and the New Zealand public's response to it, reminds us about the general susceptibility of contemporary film and TV audiences to manipulation; it reminds us about their—and our—vulnerability. I don't say this as a putdown to the mass audience. I think it is a general condition. We, the audience, have very little basis for immediately evaluating and judging the truth of much of what we are shown on film or television. A lot of it is far removed from us in time, if it is historical, or place, if it's international, and so no immediate reality check is possible. We can easily get pulled in by the context and conventions of the presentation. It is too easy to approach *Forgotten Silver* knowing it is a fake—to mistakenly adopt a feeling of superiority: "I'm an intelligent viewer and I would never fall for this."

The idea to take away is that much of our so-called knowledge of the world is based upon indirect experience. We judge appearances and presentation because we are often not in a position to directly experience the reality behind the presentation. Unsuspecting viewers of *Forgotten Silver* rely on judging the message of the film based on the form in which it is delivered (in this case, on Jackson and Botes' near-perfect rendition of the historical documentary format) and on the context of presentation or viewing (for 1995 TV viewers—is it coming from trusted sources, in this case TVNZ with advance publicity in local magazines.) It's not the gullibility of viewers. It's the total orchestration of the joke.

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