

# Thomas Spejlborg Sejersen:

## Who knows what and when? Irony, knowledge, and hybrid cinema in *I'm Still Here*

### RESUMÉ

Denne artikel undersøger grænselandet mellem dokumentar- og fiktionsdiskurs gennem en analyse af Casey Afflecks hybridfilm, *I'm Still Here* (2010). Filmens brug af ironi – tekstuel såvel som ekstratekstuel – fordrer et blik på, hvordan forskellige vidensniveauer mellem filmens sociale aktører, karakterer og tilskuere er organiseret. Den opstillede analytiske tilgang kan endvidere bruges til at skelne mellem typer af hybridfilm i en bredere forstand. Afslutningsvist argumenterer denne artikel for, at den ironiske dobbeltdiskurs, der beskrives som en specifik variant af hybridfilmen, er i stand til at producere dokumentar- og fiktionsdiskurs samtidigt.

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the border zone between documentary and fiction discourse through an investigation of Casey Affleck's hybrid film, *I'm Still Here* (2010). With the film's attribution of textual and extra-textual irony, the article focuses on the organization of levels of knowledge among social actors, characters, and spectators. The established analytical framework can also help distinguish between different variations of hybrid cinema. In conclusion, this article argues that the ironic double discourse, described as a specific variant of hybrid cinema, is capable of producing documentary and fiction discourse simultaneously.

### EMNEORD

Hybridfilm, ironi, vidensniveauer, *I'm Still Here*

### KEYWORDS

Hybrid cinema, irony, levels of knowledge, *I'm Still Here*

These new films create fictional characters who are let loose in the so-called reality – so that the documentation of the outside world's reactions to the fictions becomes somewhat authentic. (Lars Movin 2011)<sup>1</sup>

Discussions about the distinction between documentary and fiction representation are as old as the medium of film itself, yet still we find the world of cinema – on the big screen, on Netflix, at film festivals, *etc.* – clearly divided into documentary and fiction sections. Our perception of the world – and in turn, our perception of cinema – is highly dependent on our ability to distinguish between what is to be taken 'for real' – and what is made up. Some argue that without this ability, we would simply not be able to operate cognitively (Nielsen et al. 2013). Others argue that the very ability to distinguish is a general and universal constant, present in all cultures at all times (Schaeffer 2012).

As mentioned in the introductory quote, however, many new films deliberately seek to shatter the irreconcilability between documentary and fiction, the 'real' and the made up, as they introduce a cunning kind of irony between spectators watching the film – and social actors, and characters in the film itself.<sup>2</sup> In these films – such as Mads Brügger's *The Ambassador* (2011); Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat* (Larry Charles 2006); and the object of interest in this article, Casey Affleck's and Joaquin Phoenix's *I'm Still Here* (2010) – people are not exactly what they seem.

The curious case of *I'm Still Here* begins in October 2008. After a Paul Newman tribute and fundraiser show in San Francisco, an awkward, bearded, and overweight variant of Joaquin Phoenix, who the public had come to know as a charismatic and respected actor in films such as *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott 2000) and *Walk the Line* (James Mangold 2005), surprisingly declared his retirement from acting. Standing next to him, Casey Affleck – his friend, actor colleague, and brother-in-law – announced that he was documenting Phoenix' pursuit of

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<sup>1</sup> All Danish quotes are translated into English by the writer.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, I will employ a distinction between character (what is played) and the person or actor (who is playing). This was originally suggested by Aristotle in *Poetics* (2001). Also, I will adopt the term 'social actor' (see Nichols 2010 [2001]) when referring to referential, 'real' people in a given film.

a music career, which he would make into a documentary (*I'm Still Here*, ca. 10.45-11.05). Two years and several disastrous rap concerts later, the film *I'm Still Here* premiered at Venice Film Festival on September 6, 2010. Here, it was introduced as “a striking portrayal of a tumultuous year in the life of internationally acclaimed actor Joaquin Phoenix” and “a portrait of an artist at a crossroad” (Complete Press Kit 2010). In not-so-vague terms: as a documentary.

Ten days after the Venice premiere – on September 16, 2010 – everything was turned upside-down. Affleck told *The New York Times* and late film critic Roger Ebert that *I'm Still Here* was anything but a striking portrayal or a documentary; it was staged and a complete hoax (Cieply 2010; Ebert 2010b). Affleck also revealed that only a small circle of the people participating in the film knew about ‘the project’, meaning that the majority of people with whom Phoenix engaged in the film – David Letterman, journalists, audiences at concerts, bookers, *etc.* – were not informed about the basic nature or purpose of what was being and had been made. Quite naturally, people were – and still are – confused. Some film critics (e.g. Høeg 2010; Skotte 2010) suggested that the revelation completely excluded any particular authenticity of the film’s initial documentary status.<sup>3</sup> It was also argued that Affleck’s statement repositioned the film in a fiction mode resembling the prototypical mockumentary: a fiction film pretending to be a documentary, in which all of the initially accepted documentary markers can be dismissed as deceitful, fictional inventions. But does this interpretation make sense in the case of *I'm Still Here*? Was it all a hoax, and can everything in the film be dismissed as ‘pure fiction’?

This is what this article wishes to investigate, and even though we must direct attention to the extra-textual happenings surrounding the film, I will argue that the key to understanding *I'm Still Here* is found in the film itself. More precisely, the key is how irony relates to the organization of situational or existential knowledge. In *I'm Still Here*, somebody knows or understands something that others do not – but who knows what and when about which discursive status the film was in fact part of? In turn, we might ask: how does Phoenix’s ironic behavior affect our (the interpreters or addressees of the situational irony)

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<sup>3</sup> Danish film critics are referenced because *I'm Still Here*'s Danish premiere (November 11, 2010) occurred after the revelation.

ability to decide whether the film is 'real' or 'fake'? These questions must be answered before we can discuss how *I'm Still Here* can simultaneously present both documentary and fiction discourse – and in turn pose a piercing critique of notions of liberation related to modern cinema and media identity.

### **The ironic double discourse: hybrid cinema between documentary and fiction**

It is the hypothesis of this article that *I'm Still Here* is best viewed as belonging to a group of new films that are identified by their use of what can be labeled the ironic double discourse. The ironic double discourse is a discursive strategy in which both fiction and documentary is created textually through use of irony, style, and differing levels of knowledge. The ironic double discursive film presents referential 'real' people – in *I'm Still Here*, for instance, Joaquin Phoenix and David Letterman. At first, the spectator is likely to interpret the film as a documentary – or alternatively as a mockumentary.<sup>4</sup> This interpretation is related to the use of stylistic characteristics normally attributed to the documentary but also to extra-textual indexing: how a given film is described by the producer (Carroll 1996, 238). *I'm Still Here* was, for instance, indexed as a documentary when it premiered at the Venice Film Festival. At some point, the initial interpretation is undermined. This can happen both over the course of viewing the actual film (textually) or in the context (extra-textually), and the film thereby partly or completely becomes something else: here, the ironic double discourse. This reversal is inextricably linked to the use of irony, which I will explain in the following sections.

Generically speaking, the ironic double discourse is part of 'hybrid cinema', which is here understood as a mode of film that challenges our perceptions of the border zone between documentary and fiction discourse. With small variations, hybrid cinema is also what other scholars are investigating under labels such as 'borderline cases' (Cohn 1999), 'multiaccentual cinema' (Fetveit 2003), 'faction' (Harms Larsen 1990), or 'fiction-equivocal works' (Nielsen et al. 2013).

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<sup>4</sup> I will return to a discussion on the difference between the ironic double discourse and the mockumentary but will for now just state that there are essential differences in how they organize knowledge.

## Irony and levels of knowledge in hybrid cinema

In the unanimous and voluminous writing about irony, one point seems to be agreed upon: that irony has historically been viewed as a complex concept that can be investigated from a variety of theoretical and ideological perspectives. However, as this is neither an in-depth historical nor ideological analysis of irony, I will limit myself to a descriptive explanation of how irony can be framed in relation to cinema – more specifically, to levels of knowledge in cinema.

Firstly though, we must discuss the basic premises through which irony ‘happens’. In *Irony’s Edge* (1995, 10), Linda Hutcheon performs an exemplary investigation into how irony can be understood “as a discursive strategy operating at the level of language (verbal) or form (musical, visual, textual).” Furthermore, she identifies the key players in the communicative situation – the *ironist* and *interpreter* – between whom irony arises. From the point of view of the ironist, irony is defined as the “intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented” (Hutcheon 1995, 11). From the point of view of the interpreter, irony is described as “an interpretive and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid” (Hutcheon 1995, 11).

As Thomas Bredsdorff mentions in *Ironiens Pris* (2011, 20, 46), irony can also be understood as a situational or existential characteristic (when an ironist is not only using verbal irony but is also being ironic about the basic premise of the situation: the ironist is not saying something ironic but is instead acting ironically) and as a characteristic that describes an attitude toward life.<sup>5</sup> In this section, I will discuss the first two types (rhetorical irony and situational irony), whereas irony as an attitude toward life – which relates to, for instance, Søren Kierkegaard’s version of irony as investigated in *Om Begrebet Ironi* (1962 [1841]) – will be discussed in the final section.

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<sup>5</sup> Bredsdorff (2011) also discusses Socratic irony, dramatic irony, romantic irony, the irony of fate, and self-irony, all of which exceed the focus of this article.

*Rhetorical irony and levels of knowledge*

Let us begin with Bredsdorff's (2011, 25-26) paraphrased version of the Roman rhetorician Quintilian's definition of rhetorical irony: "Irony is to say the opposite of what you mean in a way that it appears from the tone, the speaker, the text, or the context that the meaning is different from the wording." From this, it becomes clear that this form of irony resembles other rhetorical and literary tropes such as metonymy, synecdoche, metaphors, and perhaps most obviously – lying. However, the intention (from the point of view of the ironist) is quite different from that of lying, as is clear from the second part of the sentence: "in a way so that it appears (...) that the meaning is different from the wording" (Bredsdorff 2011, 25-26). Here, as Bredsdorff (2011, 22-24) also notes, we can distinguish between what Kierkegaard (1962 [1841], 263) calls "the phenomenon" (the utterance) and "the essence" (the meaning). This is also what Hutcheon – perhaps in more contemporary language – calls the *expression* and the *understanding*. But what alerts the interpreter to the essence of the uttered expression? According to Hutcheon (1995, 11), the interpreter is alerted by the presence of "conflictual textual or contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon." The prepositional part of Bredsdorff's (2011, 26) Quintilian definition agrees with this and answers the question more precisely: through "the tone, the speaker, the text, or the context."

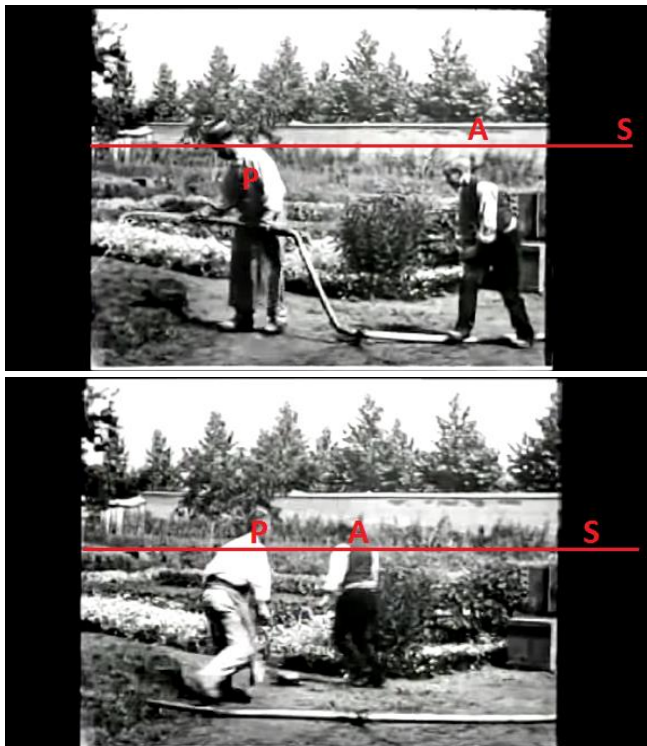
Inevitably, ironic communication can result in two opposing situations: one in which the irony is understood and one in which it is not. This understanding ultimately relates to the concept of knowledge – and to the question of *Who knows what and when?* When we refer to knowledge in cinema, we usually do so in relation to range or levels of story information among the narrator, characters, and spectator (see for instance Bordwell; Thompson 2008, 88-92). At its most basic, a cinematic situation presents these different actors: a protagonist (P), who communicates an utterance to a secondary agent (A). This also includes a spectator position (S). P can know more, less, or the same as A and S – and the same goes for A and S.<sup>6</sup>

Take the example of one of the first films ever made, *L'Arroseur Arrosé* (Lumière 1895). A man (P) is watering his garden with a hose when a boy (A) enters the

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<sup>6</sup> In practice, this is more complicated as there are more character and spectator positions, suggesting P2, A2, S2, etc. Here, I will work with the simplified PAS model.

frame and closes in on the man from behind. A steps on the hose, and the water stops. P inspects the hose and A then removes his foot from the hose, shooting water into P's face. At this point, P knows less than A. Because of the framing of the shot, the spectator (S) knows more than P and the same as A. When P turns around and realizes what has happened, the levels of story information go from hierarchical to equal. This transition, and the fact that S has unrestricted knowledge, ultimately creates the first cinematic comedy ever made.



**Fig. 1.** First (above), there is a hierarchical level of story information in *L'Arroseur Arrosé*. A few seconds later (below), it turns into an equal level of story information.

Now, when rhetorical irony is introduced in any given film, the key concern is: if P expresses something ironic, do A and/or S recognize *only* the expression or understand *both* the expression and the essence? First, if the essence of an ironic expression made by P is understood by A and S, they will all share the same knowledge. Second, if the essence of an ironic expression made by P is not understood by A and S (or by one of them), a hierarchical level of knowledge is created. If the lack of understanding is intentional from the point of view of

P, this use of irony is what gives P (whether he/she is a social actor or a character) the ability to say something to somebody (A or S) without another somebody (again A or S) being able to understand the intention. This is what gives irony its edge (recall the title of Hutcheon's book: *Irony's Edge*) as a social and/or political tool.

An illustrative example of the use of rhetorical irony is found in Mads Brügger's aforementioned *The Ambassador*. In order to infiltrate the dubious diplomatic system and the relationships between Europe and the African nations of Liberia and the Central African Republic (CAR), Mads Brügger creates a fictional character, Mads Cortzen, who engages with uninformed social actors. In many conversations with these social actors, Brügger/Cortzen employs rhetorical irony, which the informed spectator (S) – Brügger tells the spectator in Scene 3 that he is going undercover – understands. In Scene 28, for instance, he (P) insults Asian people in front of his African interpreter and assistant, Paul (A): "It is not to be racist [*sic*] but, you know, I have a problem with Asian people. They are always very sneaky; they are very greedy... and difficult to trust. And they have bad manners" (*The Ambassador*, ca. 26.40).



Fig. 2. Brügger/Cortzen as rhetorical ironist in *The Ambassador*.

We cannot be sure what Paul's honest opinions about Asian people are, as he is most likely trying to please his employer – yet Paul agrees with him. The joke is 'on' Paul. He does not understand Brügger's irony, and Paul – not Brügger – is in turn portrayed as a man who has very questionable opinions about race.



**Fig. 3** below illustrates the different levels of knowledge when rhetorical irony is present. To the left **(1)** we see that P, A, and S have the same level of knowledge if the irony is understood. To the right, it is illustrated how P can express something **(2)** that neither A nor S understand, **(3)** that only A understands, and **(4)** that only S understands. *The Ambassador* exemplifies **(4)**.

+ Irony	÷ Irony		
<b>(1)</b>	<b>(2)</b>	<b>(3)</b>	<b>(4)</b>
<u>PAS</u>	P	PA	PS
	AS	S	A

**Fig. 3.** Equal **(1)** and hierarchical **(2,3,4)** levels of knowledge

#### *Situational irony and the mockumentary*

In the present article, situational irony is defined as a variant of irony that creates existential uncertainty in the spectator/interpreter's evaluation of a given film's discursive status. As mentioned above, this occurs when an ironist is not only using verbal irony but is also being ironic about the basic premise of the situation: the ironist is not saying something ironic but is acting ironically. In *I'm Still Here*, the situational irony is mainly related to the identity of Joaquin Phoenix: is he acting, or is he 'for real' about his change of career, appearance, and behavior? The question of *Who knows what and when?* becomes more complex when situational irony is introduced in a given film. Then the question becomes: *Who knows what and when about the existential status of the cinematic situation?*

Situational irony can work in different ways, which I will exemplify here by comparing two mockumentaries – a film mode that also can be said to 'play' with situational irony: *Zelig* (Woody Allen 1983) and *Forgotten Silver* (Costa Botes, Peter Jackson 1995). In *Zelig*, the situational irony is easily understandable for the spectator (S) as Zelig (Allen), the protagonist (P), is able to physically transform himself in front of other characters (A). As this is not possible within the laws of human physics, the conclusion is quite clear from the beginning: it is a fiction film 'pretending' to be a documentary – and it

presents an equal level of knowledge (**Fig. 3 – (1)**). Besides creating one of the first ever mockumentaries, the mockery in *Zelig* is thus not directed at spectators; it is instead a mockery of the documentary form's claim to represent reality.

The situation in the case of *Forgotten Silver* is quite different. When it aired on New Zealand national television, many spectators were tricked into interpreting the film about the enigmatic Colin McKenzie as a documentary. It was a very spectacular documentary indeed, as McKenzie – according to the film – created all sorts of groundbreaking inventions such as a flying vehicle (before the Wright Brothers) and in a cinematic context: the close-up, color film, and the moving camera. The fact that referential, 'real' social actors like film producer Harvey Weinstein and film critic Leonard Maltin introduced and verified McKenzie in talking-head interviews might have helped support the documentary interpretation. As it turned out, however, McKenzie was (of course) a character wholly invented by the directors. In comparison to *Zelig*, the use of situational irony in *Forgotten Silver* is more difficult to grasp, and thus the effect of the film becomes more complex. Besides mocking the documentary form's claim to represent 'reality', it also directed its mockery at spectators who were unable to understand the essence of the ironic situation. In the case of *Forgotten Silver*, if the situational irony is not understood by the spectator, the film will (wrongly) appear to be a documentary; if it is understood, it will (correctly) appear to be a mockumentary.

However – and this is important to keep in mind when we now embark upon an analysis of *I'm Still Here* – there will only ever be an equal level of situational or existential knowledge (again **Fig. 3 – (1)**) in mockumentaries. The same goes for documentaries and fiction films for that matter. Even though *Forgotten Silver* made some spectators believe that McKenzie had lived, Weinstein, Maltin, and other 'experts' were all familiar with the hoax beforehand. Their function was not to tell the story of McKenzie; it was to mislead spectators into believing that McKenzie was, in fact, real (even though he was not). In *I'm Still Here* specifically and the ironic double discourse more generally, the mockery reaches a new level, as – quite frankly – everyone and everything are mocked: the social actors in the film and the spectators watching it, the documentary form's claim to represent 'reality', and the commonsense notion that

documentary and fiction discourse cannot exist simultaneously on a textual level.

### **The ironic double discourse in *I'm Still Here***

Let us return to *I'm Still Here* and its realm of irony, in which people were – and still are – left in a state of confusion concerning its discursive status. As we have learned, it is helpful to pay attention to how irony is attributed by the ironist-protagonist (P) and in turn how it affects the levels of knowledge for social actors (A) on-screen and spectators (S) off-screen. This matter is further complicated by the fact that the film relates to different interpretations separated by time: before and after Affleck's revelation of the hoax.

#### *The first interpretation: the reflexive-performative documentary*

Prior to September 16, 2010, it was all rather simple, as the actions and statements of Affleck and Phoenix in the public sphere – which constitute main parts of the film itself – were aimed at indexing the film as a reflexive-performative documentary (see Nichols 2010 [2001] and Bruzzi 2000). And even though many suspected the project to be a hoax, the documentary interpretation was widely opted for prior to the revelation.<sup>7</sup> This was also caused by *I'm Still Here's* use of stylistic characteristics normally associated with documentaries. In the very first scene of the film, for example, we watch what appears to be an old found footage/home movie recording of a young boy and a man. Because spectators at this point would most likely know that this is a film about Phoenix (whether it is a hoax or not), an educated guess is that the boy is Phoenix and the other person his father. How can spectators assume that the first scene is an actual recording? At this initial stage, I would argue that it is mainly due to the style: the grainy quality and the date-and-time function/intertitles in the lower left-hand corner is (or was) a defining characteristic of video recorders used for home movie recordings (see **Fig. 4**).

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<sup>7</sup> The late film critic Roger Ebert, for instance, described the film as “a sad and painful documentary” (Ebert 2010a). On September 22, 2010 (after the hoax was revealed), Ebert (2010b) summed up the confused popular reception: “Major reviews of 'I'm Still Here' linked at Metacritic indicate that only six stated flatly the film was not genuine. Nine believed it, and the rest were not sure, had doubts, were cagey, or left themselves wriggle room.”

Furthermore, it appears to be shot on location with a hand-held camera and without artificial lighting.



Fig. 4. Docu-style in *I'm Still Here* (ca. 01.05)

*The second interpretation: the ironic double discourse*

After September 16, 2010, spectators (or at least most spectators) learned that rapper-Joaquin Phoenix was a hoax, a fictional character, and when (or if) the essence of his situational irony is recognized and understood, it simply creates a doubling of existential knowledge for the spectators. On one hand, spectators are able to recognize that actor-Joaquin Phoenix is playing a fictional character, rapper-Joaquin Phoenix; on the other hand, they are just as able to see that many of the social actors onscreen – David Letterman, journalists, audiences at concerts, bookers, *etc.* – are unable to recognize this very fact. To illustrate precisely how this works, I will analyze different perspectives in the key sequence in which Phoenix is interviewed on *Late Show with David Letterman* on February 11, 2009 (*I'm Still Here*, ca. 1.10.40-1.14.45).

In this sequence, Phoenix engages with social actors within the public sphere, illustrating Movin's (2011) observation about “fictional characters who are let loose in the so-called reality.” On one hand, Phoenix engages in a fiction mode resembling interview sequences found in, for instance, the aforementioned *Borat*. On the other hand, Letterman and the baffled audience of the interview engage in a nonfictional discourse – a journalistic interview in which he and they expect rapper-Phoenix to be identical to actor-Phoenix or the ‘real’

Phoenix. Phoenix – as the ironist – is playing with the existential nature of his identity, and this application of situational irony creates a hierarchical level of knowledge wherein Phoenix (P) and Letterman (A) do not share the same situational or existential knowledge about the discursive status of the sequence.



Fig. 5. Hierarchical levels of situational knowledge in *I'm Still Here* (ca. 1.12.30)

#### *The spectator position and conflictual textual evidence*

To be able to acknowledge the ironic double discourse, spectators must be able to attribute the correct essence to the situational irony applied by the ironist, Phoenix. If they are unable to do so, they are likely to interpret the scene as either a reflexive-performative documentary scene or as a mockumentary scene. But what alerts spectators to the correct interpretation? Again, let us also recall Bredsdorff's (2011, 25-26) definition in which "the tone, the speaker, the text" are mentioned as possible means of recognizing and understanding irony. This becomes apparent in the Letterman sequence, as there are a variety of textual cues that something is off – what Hutcheon (1995, 11) labels "conflictual textual evidence." Letterman himself seems to be in a state of existential confusion: take a look, for instance, at his facial expression in **Fig. 5**. He is quite clearly sensing that something is wrong, but as neither Phoenix nor Letterman call the bluff, the interview quickly becomes a staggeringly awkward one. The fact that Letterman gradually (and probably) becomes aware of Phoenix's situational irony is substantiated by his ambiguously foresighted final words: "Joaquin, I am sorry you couldn't be here tonight" (*I'm Still Here*, ca. 1.14.35).

As a matter of fact, the film is full of conflictual textual evidence. This is, for instance, experienced in the scene in which Phoenix is paid a visit by actor Edward James Olmos (ca. 43.05-45.25). Here, Olmos speaks in a highly poetic tone that clearly resembles written dialogue: “That’s me, and that is you. Drops of water. And you are on the top of the mountain of success.” As a possible result, spectators are likely to evaluate Olmos’ appearance as unauthentic in the context of a documentary. In turn, this might cause the documentary interpretation to start collapsing – which again will force spectators to reclassify the film as something different from a reflexive-performative documentary. Recall also Ebert’s (2010b) quasi-scientific quantification of critics in the US: “only six stated flatly the film was not genuine. Nine believed it, and the rest were not sure, had doubts, were cagey, or left themselves wriggle room.” There were strong (and reasonable) doubts about the film’s discursive status before Affleck and Phoenix came clean.

The spectators who are able to understand the situational irony (whether it is due to textual or extra-textual evidence or both) find themselves in a privileged position. They (S) are on the same level of knowledge as Phoenix (P), recognizing the fictional discursive status attributed by Phoenix, which Letterman (A) cannot quite grasp. In turn, they are also able to recognize that Letterman adheres to another discourse: that of a journalistic and nonfictional interview, even though he possibly senses that something is wrong.



Fig. 6. The ironic double discourse in *I'm Still Here* (ca. 1.12.30)

Ultimately, when the hierarchical levels of situational or existential knowledge are created in the film itself through situational irony and understood by spectators, the ironic double discursive variant of hybrid cinema is present. The film simultaneously possesses both discourses (fiction and nonfiction), divided between characters and social actors onscreen. Thus, the distinction between different levels of situational or existential knowledge is what allows us to recognize the ironic double discourse – and distinguish it from the mockumentary.

### **What is the point? Irony as an attitude to life**

The use of irony in *I'm Still Here* suggests an (until now) untouched upon question, which has been posed by the majority of critical reviews and articles circulating around the film itself (e.g. Høeg 2010; Skotte 2010): what is the point? Besides the use of situational irony, I will argue that the use of irony in the film also discusses the concept as an attitude toward life.

The distinction between irony as a rhetorical concept and an attitude toward life was first suggested by German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel. However, it was Kierkegaard in *Om Begrebet Ironi* (1962 [1841]) who reshaped 'the ironic subject' from Schlegel's romantic character into a subject to whom "all existence has become foreign" (Kierkegaard 1962 [1841], 274; Bredsdorff 2011, 24-25). When Kierkegaard forwards this point, he aligns with a later version of the concept – the postmodern. In the essay 'Private irony and liberal hope' (1989, 73), philosopher Richard Rorty describes the postmodern ironic as a person who has "radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary," words, and concepts "which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives." These are among others terms such as true, good, and right. The postmodern ironic is thus a person who has experienced a complete and utter breakdown of everything and for whom "the only acceptable attitude to assume is the ironic" (Bredsdorff 2011, 190).

If we initially view Phoenix's character in relation to the first interpretation (the film being a documentary), it makes sense to understand Phoenix in accordance with Kierkegaard's ironic subject and Rorty's postmodern ironic. In the beginning of the film, Phoenix includes the spectator in the idea of changing career, as he is having difficulty understanding why he started acting in the first place:

I don't know what came first, whether they said that I was emotional and intense and complicated. Or whether I... Or whether I was truly complicated and intense and then they responded to it. (...) Yes, I utilized it in some ways... and I am embarrassed about that, and that is what a lot of this [the documentary] is about. (...) I don't want to play the character of Joaquin anymore. (Phoenix, ca. 03.25-04.05)

Here, Phoenix vocalizes radical doubts about his concepts of what feels true and right. Later, in the Olmos scene discussed above, Phoenix expresses how a new meaning, rap music, has presented itself to him. "My music makes people happy" (ca. 43.40), he explains, which of course is also ironic seen in the context of the hateful reactions we have heard earlier in the film, for instance when Phoenix's friend, Matt, reads some bad reviews aloud (ca. 40.55-41.25). In these terms, I argue that the concept of irony in *I'm Still Here* is reflected as an attitude toward life or as a life condition by the character of Phoenix. But now, if the spectator is alerted by the conflictual textual or extra-textual evidence, she or he will adhere to the second interpretation – that *I'm Still Here* is an ironic double discursive film. Thus, as we have also learned, Phoenix's points should be reversed to the exact opposite, as this is the very nature of irony. Phoenix, then, is not vocalizing radical thoughts about changing his life: he is mocking the idea that this is at all possible.

The film's narrative should be viewed from the same ironic perspective. In the first scene (as described above), we see a boy standing in a paradisiacal setting, jumping into the water. In the last scene (ca. 1.42.40-1.44.05), we find Phoenix descending slowly into a similar paradisiacal river in Panama. Without taking the point too far, this does, to some extent, illustrate a kind of liberation – from a paradisiacal state, through a mental crisis, and finally returning to another paradisiacal state. But irony catches up with the sentimentalist, and instead of creating a happy ending for our hero, *I'm Still Here* becomes a mockery of not only the documentary, the spectator, and idea that documentary and fiction discourse cannot exist simultaneously on a textual level – but also of the modern liberation narrative. It mocks the idea that Phoenix can leave his old world behind: the very idea that you can actually liberate yourself from the identity the media gives you, for instance as a failure. According to *I'm Still Here*, this is the great lie.



## Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have argued that documentary and fiction can coexist within hybrid cinema in general and within the ironic double discourse in particular. I have also argued that this is mainly due to characters', social actors', and spectators' recognition of situational irony (an ironist-created characteristic that doubles the discursive status of a given film). Furthermore, the question as to whether *I'm Still Here* is documentary or fiction has an equivocal answer: in the ironic double discursive sequences, it is quite simply a combination of both. There are two levels of situational and existential knowledge presented textually and simultaneously.

This leaves us with a number of conclusions. First, the ironic double discourse is different from other hybrid cinematic modes, such as the mockumentary, since the levels of situational or existential knowledge in the films are hierarchical, not equal. Second, there are different discourses in *I'm Still Here* according to the spectator's ability to understand the film's use of irony: a reflexive-performative documentary mode (which can be regarded as 'the wrong mode', as it is affected by the intended misreading) and an ironic double discourse mode. If the situational irony employed by Phoenix in particular is not understood or is attributed the correct essence (that it is a hoax), spectators will tend to engage in the reflexive-performative documentary mode, mainly due to documentarian stylistic characteristics. If the film is interpreted as such, Phoenix can be viewed as possessing a certain Kierkegaardian and Rortian attitude to life and identity. However, if spectators understand the essence of the ironic phenomenon (as argued, mainly through conflictual textual evidence in this film), they will engage in the ironic double discourse. Due to the situational irony, Phoenix's character is better viewed as a mockery – rather than as a representative – of the postmodern ironic. In the same manner, the liberatory ending that the character of Phoenix undergoes can be viewed as a criticism of the notion of liberation in modern narrative.

Given that the ironic double discourse has invaded documentary and mockumentary discourse, we can assume that it has the potential to invade other discourses within, and even beyond, cinema. In contemporary culture, we have already witnessed how the phenomenon of hybridity has challenged narrative discourse, for instance, when author Karl Ove Knausgaard (primarily known for his autobiography-like opus, *My Struggle* (2009-2011)) has been

accused of actions expressed in his hybrid novels. But can he – or anyone – be held accountable for what is expressed within a phenomenon that combines fiction and nonfiction discourse? This dilemma illustrates how the phenomenon of hybridity prompts ethical questions that transcend the boundaries of cinema and aesthetics and collide with a reality in which an ambiguous notion of truth is not fully accepted.

From this perspective, I see a number of relevant questions for further research concerning, for example, how theoretical and empirical spectators experience this privileged and ambiguous notion of truth in relation to hybrid discourses – aesthetic as well as journalistic. Evidently, these questions exceed the limits of this article, but we now know that the ironic double discourse challenges the border between documentary and fiction, not by erasing it but by connecting characteristics from both discourses.

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### Filmography

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