



Framing the Author Surrogate for an Academic Docufiction Screenplay

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between fiction and reality in the docufiction genre, concentrating on the function of the author's surrogate characters. Docufiction is a hybrid genre that combines fiction and documentary elements, providing filmmakers with a distinctive medium to cinematically express their viewpoints on actual events. However, the emergence of "academic screenwriting" from academia presents an alternative practice that sees the screenplay not just as a blueprint that depends on an audio/visual production for its consumption but as both a method of research enquiry and an independent research artefact which generates and disseminates new knowledge and most importantly new ways of practice. In this context, it is crucial to investigate the framing of the author's surrogates in an academic screenplay meant to be read since these characters work as a means of purposefully blurring the lines between the author's voice and the reality that is portrayed. The study deployed qualitative in gathering data. Content analysis was used in analyzing the content of "The 37th State", an academic docufiction feature screenplay written as part of ongoing Practice-Based research in screenwriting. Secondary data were collected through books, journals, archival documents and online sources. Postmodern character theory was used in analyzing the author surrogate hybrid characters in "The 37th State", with keen interest on how they are constructed and smoothly incorporated into the narrative through framing and identifying



the roles they play such as navigating the narrative, serving as interviewers and documentarians, representing the author's experience (s) and reflecting the author's values. The study found that by intentionally blending facts and fiction through this character, authors can create narratives that reflect their perspectives on actual events and challenge conventional ideas about truth and imagination.

Keywords: Migration; Humanitarian; Development; Issue; Nigeria

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Introduction

The term "docufiction", which is a combination of "documentary" and "fiction," refers to a genre in which the distinction between factual and fictitious content is blurred. This genre creates stories that frequently conflate imagination and reality by fusing parts of fictional storytelling with factual cinematography. Rhodes and Springer described docufiction as "the creative merging and synthesis of documentary and fictional narrative cinema"¹. Iwuh and Patrick described it as the blend of documentary with fictional elements; in some cases, filmed in real time as real events unfold and sometimes performed by amateur actors who play themselves or fictionalized versions of themselves in a fictionalized setting². Taking inspiration from fictional storylines, docufiction is a more adaptable genre that values artistic flexibility. Its primary goal is to depict events as accurately as possible, allowing the scriptwriter to develop stories using fictional and real aspects³. Weinstein corroborated this assertion in his article "Adapting a True Story: Examples of Writing Fiction Based on True Events" by stating that

¹ Rhodes, Gary Don and Springer, John Parris (2006), *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.

² Iwuh, John and Patrick, N. A. (2022), 'Reading the docufiction script: Harnessing the thin line between facts and fiction', *Journal of Screenwriting*, 13:3, pp. 375–87, https://doi.org/10.1386/josc_00107_1

³ Botha, Albert (2017), 'Docufiction: An investigation into the ontological levels of fiction and nonfiction in the film *Close-up* (Kiarostami 1990)', *Researchgate.net*, 9 May, <https://www.researchgate.net/project/Docufiction-An-investigation-into-the-ontological-levels-of-fiction-and-non-fiction-in-the-film-Close-up-Kiarostami-1990/>. Accessed 16 August 2021.



"In docufiction, you can let true events as they actually happened steer the course of your characters' narrative trajectory."⁴

The term "author surrogates" describes fictional characters that an author creates to symbolize or act as a stand-in for the author's ideas, emotions, or viewpoints. Because these characters and the author frequently have something in common, they can communicate their ideas, opinions, and experiences throughout the story. According to Iwuh and Patrick "The medium of docufiction allows the authors to investigate and tell their personal stories through invented characters [or author surrogates] and use the real characters and events to serve as evidence. The fictional characters created serve as mouthpieces and the story drivers of the authors⁵. Author surrogates can be used in a variety of genres and media to allow authors to explore and subtly convey their own points of view. They expressed the Author's Voice, analyzed individual themes, established a connection with the audience, and analyzed Culture. Author surrogates are essential in academic docufiction scripts because they offer a personal and frequently introspective viewpoint on the subject matter, helping to bridge the gap between factual content and creative storytelling. Also, the surrogate aids in bridging the knowledge gap between academic research and the general audience by placing academic discourse inside a narrative framework.

This paper explores the complex relationship that exists between fiction and reality in the docufiction genre, concentrating on the function of the author's surrogate characters. As mentioned earlier, docufiction is a hybrid genre that combines fiction and documentary elements, providing filmmakers with a distinctive medium to express their viewpoints on actual events cinematically. However, the emergence of "academic screenwriting" from academia presents an alternative practice that sees the screenplay not just as a blueprint that depends on an audio/visual production for its consumption but as both a method of research enquiry and an independent research artefact which generates and disseminates new knowledge and most importantly new ways of practice⁶. (See Batty, C. & McAulay, A.

⁴ Weinstein, M. (2020), 'Adapting a True Story: Examples of Writing Fiction Based on True Events' *Studio Binder*, April 27. Available online: <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/writing-fiction-based-on-true-events/> (accessed November 14)

⁵ Iwuh, John and Patrick, N. A. (2022), 'Reading the docufiction script: Harnessing the thin line between facts and fiction', *Journal of Screenwriting*, 13:3, pp. 375–87, https://doi.org/10.1386/josc_00107_1

⁶ Batty, C. & McAulay, A. (2016), 'The Academic Screenplay: Approaching Screenwriting As a Research Practice', *Writing in Practice: The Journal of*



(2016), Baker, D. J. (2016), Batty, C., & Baker, D.J. (2018)). By implication, the content of a screenplay can be consumed or read by readers as a finished product.

In this context, it is crucial to investigate the framing of the author's surrogates in an academic docufiction screenplay meant to be read since these characters work to purposefully blur the lines between the author's voice and the reality portrayed. The study conducts an analysis of how the author surrogates in "The 37th State?", an academic docufiction feature screenplay written as part of ongoing Practice-Based research in screenwriting are constructed and smoothly incorporated into the narrative through framing and identifying the roles they play such as navigating the narrative, serving as interviewers and documentarian, representing the author's experience(s) and reflecting the author's values. The paper aims to shed light on the nuanced ways author surrogates add to the richness of docufiction narratives, especially those designed for readership in the academia.

Theoretical Framework

The study deployed Postmodern Character Theory derived from Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) concept of the "incredulity towards metanarratives"⁷ which influences how postmodern characters are portrayed. The framework examines characters in literature, film, and other media through the lens of postmodernism. This approach deconstructs traditional notions of character identity, coherence, and narrative roles. It emphasises fragmented, ambiguous, self-referential characters, challenging conventional storytelling and character development.

Creative Writing Research, 2.

<https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:151878234>.

Baker, D. J. (2016), 'The Screenplay As Text: Academic Scriptwriting As Creative Research' *New Writing*, 13(1): 71-84. DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2015.1133654.

Batty, C., & Baker, D.J. (2018), 'Screenwriting as a Mode of Research, and the Screenplay as a Research Artefact', *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry*, 67-83. DOI:10.1007/978-3-319-62837-0_5.

⁷ Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Foreword by Fredric Jameson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.



Significance of Postmodern Character Theory to the Study

The framework is used in analyzing the author surrogate hybrid characters in "The 37th State", with keen interest on how they are constructed and smoothly incorporated into the narrative through framing and identifying the roles they play such as navigating the narrative, serving as interviewers and documentarians, representing the author's experience (s) and reflecting the author's values. However, it has limitations that could be explored and improved upon, such as:

- i. Postmodern characters' fragmented and ambiguous nature can make narratives challenging to follow and understand for some audiences. This complexity may limit the accessibility and appeal of such works.
- ii. The emphasis on fragmentation and multiple perspectives can overshadow the importance of coherence and continuity in character development. This can lead to characters that feel inconsistent or poorly developed.
- iii. By subverting traditional character arcs and narrative structures, postmodern characters can sometimes fail to provide the sense of resolution or catharsis that more conventional stories offer. This can leave audiences feeling unsatisfied.

Literature Review

Docufiction, a genre situated at the intersection of documentary and fiction filmmaking, is a cinematic or literary mode that blurs the conventional boundaries between reality and imagination. This hybrid form seamlessly incorporates elements of factual representation, often drawing from real-life events alongside fictional narratives and artistic embellishments. It attempts to present a cohesive and compelling narrative while maintaining a commitment to authenticity and truthfulness. Through a deliberate fusion of documentary and fictional storytelling techniques, docufiction seeks to engage audiences in a thought-provoking exploration of the complexities inherent in the human experience, challenging traditional notions of objective reality and subjective interpretation.

Docufiction is produced in different shades. 'Some use scripted dramatic reconstruction; some rely on improvised material, featuring characters riffing on their real lives; some experiment visually with the



whole idea of truth.⁸ A good example is "Faction". According to Lipkin et al.⁹, The Faction is a film that utilizes a series of real-world events "[...] to create a fiction that runs in parallel to a set of known circumstances". Faction leverages the audience's knowledge of real-world or historical occurrences, spending little time relating to the audience about the facts of the events. They also considered factions to be like a dramatic or narrative film. The example Lipkin et al. gave for this category is *Medium Cool* (1969). *Medium Cool* captures the 1968 Democratic National Convention with an egotistical news journalist at the centre of the action. As the story unfolds, actors move in and out of actual protest scenes. Because the viewers know the real-world events and the protests reflected in the story, navigating through the real event and the narrative is much easier. Another example of the faction given is *Washington Behind Closed Doors* (1977), which projected the Watergate scandal through the actions of an imaginary president.

Another example of docufiction is Joseph V. Brown's "Rigged" (2010), written as part of a thesis titled "Scripting the Docufiction: Combining the Narrative and Documentary Modes in a Social Issue Film." Brown developed an original feature-length script titled "Rigged" that moves back and forth between the documentary and fiction film. He weaves a fictional story while examining the issue of corruption in the higher education finance and student loan systems. According to Brown "Filmmakers who want to help viewers along, or exert some sort of control over how the viewer engages with the film, utilize documentary-like aesthetics to invoke a sense of reality. His goal is to encourage viewers to engage with his fiction/nonfiction hybrid as if it is real. He stated: "The student loan companies and financial aid administrators worked together to increase profits at the expense of students¹⁰. Now viewers must simply imagine what might have happened had those involved been threatened with the possibility of exposure. More so, Brown cited how Landesman's article "In and out of this world: Digital Video and the aesthetics of realism in the new hybrid documentary" influenced his work. Landesman pays particular attention in this article to the way audiences engage with the hybrid

⁸ Phillips, Charlie (2018), 'Observational films are outshone by a blend of fact and fiction', *The Observer*, 29 April.

⁹ Lipkin, Steven N., Paget, Derek and Roscoe, Jane (2006), 'Docudrama and mock-documentary: Defining terms, proposing canons', in G. D. Rhodes and J. P. Springer (eds), *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.

¹⁰ Brown, Joseph V. (2010), 'Scripting the docufiction: Combining the narrative and documentary modes in a social issue film', master's thesis, Denver, CO: University of Denver.



film as well as the effect new technology has had on the development of the hybrid form. He appears to be less interested in how fiction and nonfiction can be combined but in the effect of this combination and argues that the documentary "facet" incorporated into the hybrid film "becomes less of a clear genre indicator and more an aesthetic strategy by which a filmmaker can choose to indicate familiar notions of authenticity or solicit the viewer to embrace a documentary mode of engagement"¹¹. Brown further stated that Landesman's article prompted him to think about more than just the ways fiction and nonfiction can be combined and more about the ways these two modes can be utilized in an attempt to solicit certain reactions. Following Landesman's argument on the use of shaky camera and other cinema vérité type techniques to suggest the audience engage with the film as if it were a "true" recording of actual events, Brown further stated that Landesman's discussion is instructive because it prompts him to think about how he wants an audience to engage with the script/film he is writing and hopes that by applying this technique, his audience will experience the documentary aspects of his film as fictions that come uncomfortably close to a possible reality.

Another example is Quentin Tarantino, who deployed revisionist history to recount the infamous murder of Sharon Tate, an American actress and model and four of her associates on August 9, 1969, in Los Angeles, California, by the Manson family in 2019. *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood* though a comedy-drama film, *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*¹² can be classified as docufiction because Tarantino told a factual story, putting words of real people verbatim on the lips of actors and twisting the end of a factual incident to soothe the Hollywood cathartic happy ending saga. We can see that at the film's climax, where the script combines real quotes with fictional action. On the actual night of the murders, Tex Watson was quoted to have said to Tate's friend, Wojciech Frykowski, 'I'm the devil, and I'm here to do the devil's business.' In Tarantino's version, Tex (played by Austin Butler) renders this line verbatim. However, when the fight starts, Tarantino uses Cliff (played by Brad Pitt) and Rick Dalton (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) to defend Rick's home from the invading Manson family cultists, thereby saving Sharon Tate's life as opposed to her actual murder in real life. Although factual events were altered, Hainey stated that Tarantino 'knew he wanted it to be

¹¹ Landesman, Omar(2008). "In and out of this world: digital video and the aesthetics of realism in the new hybrid documentary." *Studies in Documentary Film* 2:1 : 33-45.

¹² Quentin, Tarantino, dr. *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*. Columbia Pictures, Bona Film Group, Heyday Films, 2019.



titled *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, evoking the idea of a fairy tale [and] publicly referred to the project as Magnum opus¹³. Indeed, the work is a masterpiece because it was released to much critical acclaim. The movie shows the extent to which creative freedom can be explored by filmmakers in expressing or representing their version of the truth, as succinctly expressed by Weinstein when he said 'Everyone has their own idea of "the truth," and most people are savvy enough to know that any film that represents reality is exactly that — a representation.¹⁴

*Uncut Gems*¹⁵, co-written and directed by The Safdie Brothers (Josh and Benny Safdie) and Ronald Bronstein, and *Heaven Knows What* (2014), directed by Ben and Joshua Safdie and written by Ronald Bronstein and Joshua Safdie, are other examples of docufiction. *Uncut Gems* (2019) inserted historical events inside the scripted drama, while *Heaven Knows What* (2015) is based on an unpublished memoir of Arielle Holmes, "Mad Love in New York City", in which she recounted her personal story as a homeless heroin addict living on the streets of New York City. Josh Safdie, the director, encouraged her to write the memoir after discovering her. Arielle Holmes stars as a semi-fictionalized version of herself in the film as she recounts their love story with her late boyfriend Ilya Leontyev (played by Caleb Landry Jones), who was found dead after a drug overdose in Central Park in April 2015.

Controversies About the Blending of Facts and Fiction

There are controversies surrounding the Hybrid genres, with some viewers alleging that the combination of fact and fiction produces uncomfortable feelings and reactions. Some critics even go to the extent of describing it as "dangerous and misleading. Beattie attributed this to the fact that many audiences still adhere to highly structured ways of thinking about "truth" in film. He cited three British television docudramas - The "Scotland Yard" programmes of the late 1950s, *Cathy Come Home*, and *Death of a Princess* (1980). Beattie stated that after the release of each of these docudramas, there

¹³ Hainey, Michael (2019) "Quentin Tarantino, Brad Pitt, and Leonardo DiCaprio Take You Inside *Once Upon a Time...In Hollywood*, *Esquire*," May 21. <https://www.esquire.com>, Retrieved December 19, 2023.

¹⁴ Weinstein, M. (2020), 'Adapting a True Story: Examples of Writing Fiction Based on True Events' *Studio Binder*, April 27. Available online: <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/writing-fiction-based-on-true-events/> (accessed November 14)

¹⁵ The Safdie Brothers dr. *Uncut Gems*. IMDbPro. 2019.



were numerous critics, newspaper columnists, and politicians who argued that the blending of fiction and nonfiction was "extremely dangerous and misleading" and that "viewers have the right to know whether what they are being offered is real or invented"¹⁶. Beattie also referenced Peter Watkin's *The War Game* (1965), which was banned for 20 years. The docudrama hybrid captures the fallout of an imagined nuclear attack on Britain. The film was so alarming, so close to an imagined and dreaded future, that Beattie claims it was "too close" to the truth¹⁷. 'Whether the film was censored for fears of its potential to incite panic, or for other political reasons (probably for its critique of Britain's nuclear arms policies)' (Brown)¹⁸, Beattie claims that *The War Game* is the perfect example of the docudrama's potential to ruffle feathers. Whereas Landesman points out that the hybrid film has the potential to engage audiences in a non-traditional way (Landesman cited by Brown)¹⁹.

Beattie attributed these controversies to the fact that many audiences still adhere to highly structured ways of thinking about 'truth' in film²⁰. However, these criticisms and arguments about blending facts and fiction may linger, but 'screenwriting and filmmaking in general, as products of creativity, will also not remain static'²¹. (Iwu and Patrick).

Hybrid Documentary in the Digital Age

As the world evolves with globalisation and technological advancement constantly shaping and reshaping our lives, both non-fiction and fictitious narratives are creatively fashioned to reach target audiences who are not just consumers but the reason most of the narratives are crafted. With the advent of digital media, which creates communication tools and platforms via the internet, such as interactive websites, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube and streaming services,

¹⁶ Beattie, Keith (2004), *Documentary Screens: Nonfiction Film and Television*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Brown, Joseph V. (2010), 'Scripting the docufiction: Combining the narrative and documentary modes in a social issue film', master's thesis, Denver, CO: University of Denver.

¹⁹ Landesman, Omar(2008). "In and out of this world: digital video and the aesthetics of realism in the new hybrid documentary." *Studies in Documentary Film* 2:1 : 33-45.

²⁰ Beattie, Keith (2004), *Documentary Screens: Nonfiction Film and Television*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

²¹ Iwuh, John and Patrick, N. A. (2022), 'Reading the docufiction script: Harnessing the thin line between facts and fiction', *Journal of Screenwriting*, 13:3, pp. 375–87, https://doi.org/10.1386/josc_00107_1



connecting with the audience has become more accessible and easier. These technological strides have given rise to a phenomenon called transmedia storytelling, which Jenkins, a media scholar, credited with formalising the concept defined as a 'process where integral elements of a narrative are systematically dispersed across multiple delivery channels to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience'²². The Marvel Cinematic Universe stands as an example of a successful transmedia storyteller with many interconnected films, TV shows, and comics, which creates a cohesive narrative world that engages audiences on multiple levels.

Although 'traditional documentary filmmaking often relies on a linear storytelling approach, with the film [and Television] being the sole medium through which the narrative is conveyed, Strategic transmedia, on the other hand, takes a holistic approach, leveraging multiple platforms to tell a comprehensive and immersive story.'²³ (Storysmart). According to Kim cited in Hart, Hybrid documentaries often use the latest equipment and technologies to great effect. Virtual and augmented reality, glasses-free 3D film, interactive formats, and digital data visualisations have been used to dismantle power structures and advocate for change²⁴. Hart added that 'Even for more traditional documentary formats, these modern tools are useful, but their application may have consequences in terms of ethics and accuracy'²⁵. she cites examples from the producers of *Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain* (2021), directed by Morgan Neville who 'did not disclose the commissioning of a software company to use AI technology to analyse recordings of the deceased celebrity chef's voice and create a narration,' a decision that raises ethical concerns. However, this is the reality today in documentary and hybrid documentaries. Besides films and television series featuring documentaries and hybrid narratives, interactive websites provide additional information boosting the historical context, as well as additional interviews and behind-the-scenes content. Social media

²² Jenkins, H. (2006). 'Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. "The Power of Transmedia Storytelling: Unleashing the Full Potential.' NYU Press, Yellowbrick.

²³ Storysmart (Nov 18, 2023). 'Maximizing Impact & Return on Investment in Documentary Filmmaking' Strategic Transmedia Filmmaking <https://www.storysmart.net/strategic-transmedia-filmmaking3583d513> [Accessed November 2023]

²⁴ Kim, Jihoon. 2022. *Documentary's Expanded Fields: New Media and the Twenty-First-Century Documentary*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.

²⁵ Hart, P. (2023). Disruptive docs: teaching hybrid documentary filmmaking in Australia. *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, 17(1-2), 82-94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503175.2023.2224616>



are used to engage the audience, give updates, and invite user-generated content. Podcasts are equally used to kick-start expert interviews on the content. Some key examples of documentary and hybrid documentary that deploy the transmedia approach include *Stories We Tell* (2012), a Canadian documentary film written and directed by Sarah Polley and produced by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) is an example of hybrid which blends documentary and fictional techniques to explore Sarah Polley's family history. A recent example of a documentary deploying the transmedia style is *Obrero* ('worker')²⁶, an independent multi-platform documentary project directed by Norman Zafra, which tells the stories of Filipino rebuild workers temporarily migrating to Christchurch, Aotearoa, New Zealand, after the earthquake in 2011. The project uses three media formats: the documentary film, the interactive documentary (i-doc) and the social media page. It also employs a 'transjournalistic mode of representation, expanding the reportage of labour migration through different documentary variants.' (obrerofilm.com). *Obrero* (2021) was also used as a case study of a practice-led research conducted by Norman Zafra, the director titled "From film to Web 2.0: Transmedia as a distribution model for political documentary" which was published in Taylor & Francis in *Studies in Documentary Film* on September 23, 2022. This serves as another outlet for the transmedia feature documentary, especially amongst audiences from academia.

Brief Analysis of the Author Surrogate in Selected Films

***Adaptation*²⁷ Directed by Spike Jonze, Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman**

Deployment of the Author Surrogate:

- i. Self-Referential Screenplay: The author surrogate in "Adaptation" is the screenwriter himself, Charlie Kaufman, who is portrayed as a character within the film. This self-referential technique blurs the line between reality and fiction.
- ii. Narrative Struggle: Kaufman's character struggles with writer's block and personal insecurities while attempting to adapt Susan Orlean's book "The Orchid Thief" into a screenplay. His twin brother, Donald (a fictional character), serves as a foil,

²⁶ Zafra, N. (Director). (2018 March 13th). *Obero (Worker)* [Film]

²⁷ Jonze, Spike, dir. *Adaptation*. Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman. Columbia Pictures, 2002.

representing a more commercially driven and less neurotic approach to writing.

- iii. **Metafictional Elements:** The film incorporates numerous metafictional elements, such as Kaufman attending screenwriting seminars and debating narrative techniques. This reflects on the nature of storytelling and the creative process.
- iv. **Thematic Exploration:** The surrogate's journey explores themes of authenticity, creative struggle, and the intersection of reality and fiction. Kaufman's character's experiences parallel the thematic content of the book he is adapting, creating a layered narrative structure.

Effectiveness:

- i. **Narrative Coherence:** Despite its complex structure, the surrogate's presence is integral to the film's narrative, enhancing its depth and coherence.
- ii. **Thematic Depth:** The surrogate facilitates a rich exploration of personal and creative challenges, blending humor with existential introspection.
- iii. **Audience Engagement:** Kaufman's portrayal as the surrogate is relatable and engaging, inviting the audience into his creative and emotional journey.

***My Winnipeg*²⁸ Directed by Guy Maddin**

Deployment of the Author Surrogate:

- i. **Director as Narrator:** Guy Maddin himself serves as the author surrogate, narrating the film and recounting his experiences growing up in Winnipeg. His narration blends autobiographical details with fictional and fantastical elements.
- ii. **Documentary and Fiction Hybrid:** The film combines documentary footage with re-enactments and surreal imagery, creating a unique docufiction style that challenges conventional storytelling.

²⁸ Maddin, Guy, dir. *My Winnipeg*. The Film Company, 2007.

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- iii. **Personal and Mythical:** Maddin's surrogate persona explores the city's history, mythology, and his personal memories, creating a subjective and dreamlike portrayal of Winnipeg.
- iv. **Reflective and Ironic Tone:** The surrogate's reflective and often ironic tone adds layers of meaning, questioning the nature of memory, history, and identity.

Effectiveness:

- i. **Narrative Coherence:** The film's coherence is maintained through the consistent voice of the surrogate, despite its non-linear and fragmented structure.
- ii. **Thematic Depth:** Maddin's use of the surrogate allows for a deep and personal exploration of themes such as memory, place, and the blending of fact and fiction.
- iii. **Audience Engagement:** The unique narrative style and Maddin's engaging and personal narration draw the audience into his imaginative and nostalgic vision of Winnipeg.

F for Fake²⁹ Directed by Orson Welles

Deployment of the Author Surrogate:

- i. **Welles as Showman and Narrator:** **Orson** Welles himself appears on screen, serving as both the narrator and a central figure in the film. He presents and comments on the stories of art forger Elmyr de Hory and biographer Clifford Irving.
- ii. **Breaking the Fourth Wall:** Welles frequently breaks the fourth wall, directly addressing the audience and reflecting on the nature of art, authenticity, and deception.
- iii. **Playful Structure:** The film's structure is playful and nonlinear, blending documentary footage with staged scenes and narrative digressions. Welles' surrogate persona guides the audience through these layers of truth and fiction.

²⁹ Welles, Orson, dir. *F for Fake*. Janus Films, 1973.

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- iv. Exploration of Art and Deception: The surrogate's role is central to the film's exploration of the blurred lines between reality and illusion in the world of art and forgery.

Effectiveness:

- i. Narrative Coherence: Welles' charismatic presence and narrative control ensure the film's coherence, despite its complex and fragmented structure.
- ii. Thematic Depth: The surrogate's reflections add depth to the film's exploration of authenticity, creativity, and the nature of storytelling.
- iii. Audience Engagement: Welles' engaging and authoritative narration captivates the audience, making the film's exploration of truth and deception both entertaining and thought-provoking.

Finally, in each of these films, the author surrogate is deployed in a way that enhances narrative complexity and thematic depth. The surrogate serves as a bridge between the real and the fictional, inviting the audience into an exploration of truth, creativity, and identity. These films challenge traditional storytelling conventions and engage the audience on multiple levels by blurring the lines between author, narrator, and character.

The Deployment of Author Surrogate in "The 37th State"

A Prequel to "The 37th State"

"The 37th State?" attempts to truthfully depict the socio-political realities of Nigerian society with emphasis on how the February 2023 general elections took place, the rippling effects it had on the country and the "Japa syndrome" (emigrating abroad). Since Nigeria achieved independence on October 1st, 1960, following its first election held on December 12th, 1959, fraudulent practices have persisted within the electoral system to undermine the nascent democracy. Such misconduct includes vote buying and ballot snatching, as well as bribery among electoral and security officials, including judges, aimed at subverting the people's will and public trust in democratic institutions. This vicious cycle of corrupt elections continued into the year 2023 with one of Nigerian history's most fiercely contested polls ever observed. Written as part of an ongoing practice-based PhD thesis in screenwriting, "The 37th State?" juxtaposes



evidence with observation, imagination, and creativity to present real situations in a truthful and creative manner. The aim is to reach young Nigerians with facts about the deteriorating polity in the country while entertaining them.

Log Line

A young, brilliant Nigerian lawyer must abandon the idea of "Japaying" (emigrating abroad) to confront an inept and corrupt politician who secretly killed his parents and sponsored his higher education in order to earn his loyalty.

Synopsis

"The 37th State" is a docufiction screenplay written as part of an ongoing practice-based PhD thesis in Screenwriting. It attempts to truthfully depict the socio-political realities of the Nigerian society with a keen emphasis on electoral malpractices, corruption and the emigration crisis Nigeria is facing. It captures events in the build to, during and after Nigeria's 2023 general. Nigeria has 36 states. The 37th state is a fictitious environment invented to enable the blending of facts and fiction without ruffling feathers or attracting the harsh reaction of the political elites who are the key antagonist of the story. It tells a fictitious story of Barrister Adai, a promising lawyer and a patriotic Nigerian citizen who is forced to consider "Japaying" (emigrating abroad) because a clash between him and General, the inept and corrupt politician and the sitting governor of the 37th State whom he helped get to power. The feud between the two ensues after Barrister Adai refuses to help him with his second term bid because of his failure to deliver his campaign promises. However, Barrister Adai abandons the idea of "Japaying" to confront General, after discovering that general secretly killed his parents and sponsored his higher education in order to earn his loyalty. This leads to a campaign that brings General down during the general elections. The 37th State inserts real comments on events made by political actors and bureaucrats and invented fictitious characters to comment on them.

The Deployment of Author Surrogate in Nicodemus Adai Patrick's academic docufiction script, "The 37th State"

As mentioned earlier, docufiction is a genre that blends elements of documentary and fiction. In docufiction, an author surrogate may be employed in various ways to enhance the narrative. They could be deployed as Narrative Voice, which navigates the narrative; they play



the **role of** an interviewer or documentarian; they could represent the Author's experiences and Reflect the Author's Values. We will examine how the screenwriter/author deployed these techniques in his docufiction script, "The 37th State".

Navigating the Narrative: When fiction and reality intentionally intertwine, the author surrogate can serve as a conduit for viewers/readers in docufiction to navigate complex layers of storytelling. Their guidance helps make sense of the narrative's intricacies.

"The 37th State" uses parallel plot lines to narrate the story. The main plot line follows the fictitious story of Bar. Adai who must abandon the idea of "Japaying" (emigrating abroad) to confront General, the inept and corrupt politician who secretly killed his parents and sponsored his higher education in order to earn his loyalty. The parallel plot lines showcase factual events that occurred prior to, during and after Nigeria's February 2023 general elections. Real comments on events made by political actors and bureaucrats on the conduct of the election on National television, Newspapers and radio stations were seamlessly inserted into the narrative through invented podcasts, and partly fictionalized radio programmes and fictitious characters were made to comment on them. Also, real incidents of electoral malpractices ranging from vote buying, ballot box snatching, arson and disruption of the electoral process and bribery of electoral officials and judges to subvert the will of the people were equally injected into the story. Therefore, juxtaposing facts and evidence with observation, imagination, and creativity will require clarification for two reasons. First, there is an ethical consideration that the blurring of the line between facts and fiction may generate controversy about the sanctity of the truth, and second, the attempt to guide the viewers or readers in differentiating the real from the invented. Hence, the narrator's voice was introduced to help navigate the murky nature of docufiction that aims to present young Nigerian audiences with facts about the deteriorating polity in the country while entertaining them. "The 37th State" deploys the use of first-person narrative voiceover and Direct Address where the surrogate breaks the fourth wall to engage directly with the audience, thereby adding layers of self-awareness and metafiction at the beginning of the script to introduce the story and later in the body of the script in order to maintain transparency and ethical storytelling by giving the audience hints about the blend of fact and fiction in a bit to respect the truth of the documentary elements. One of such narration happens in the opening scene in Singapore, where the voice-over of the main character gives us a glimpse of what we are to see in the narrative and hints to us about



the blending of facts and fiction in the story when he and a lady tour the 12 times world best airport in the world, the Changi Airport, Singapore, the airport garden, the 1.3 billion lifestyle hub, the rooftop swimming pool, the giant doughnut-shaped shopping mall in a sky train where they enter the Jewel, sighting the 130-foot tall indoor waterfall, the tallest in the world as he awaits their flight to Nigeria.

ADAI (V.O)

These state-of-the-art structures remind me of where I come from and the reason why we are where we are. A land richly blessed but cursed by a mystery that lies bare before our very eyes. (faces the camera and speaks) Join me in this journey of exploration into Nigeria's complex socio-political realities as I navigate the blend of fictitious stories told to reinforce factual events happening in Nigeria(1).

This narration reveals the author's perspective on the economic strength of Singapore and the sharp contrast to that of his country, Nigeria, which he attributes to "a mystery that lays bare before our very eyes". The mystery is what his eventual journey to Nigeria will reveal. The subsequent scene reveals Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, located in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. We see potholes on the runway and cows grazing and crossing the runway. Being the most populous nation in Africa and rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and various mineral resources, Nigeria still grapples with corruption, insecurity, and poverty, among many vices that prevent it from growing and competing with many developed countries like Singapore that were once struggling but gradually evolved due to share resilience and good leadership. This is the author expressing his frustration about about the slow progress in Nigeria as a result of corruption and bad governance and comparing it to Singapore a nation that had her independence within the same period with Nigeria. Another instance where this technique was used in the screenplay is when Barrister Adai is to travel to the 37th State, the invented state created to freely discuss Nigerian situation from Abuja, the capital of Nigeria. He looks directly at the camera and says:

BAR. ADAI

Please join me as I embark on a journey to Nigeria's 37th state. A fictitious state created to discuss Nigeria's socio-political realities and familiar events that took place before, during and after Nigeria's 2023 general elections, using invented characters who embody the qualities of real Nigerians, real

personalities and fictionalize version of some real subjects. (30)

The Role of an Interviewer or Documentarian: The author surrogate may act as an interviewer or documentarian in the narrative. The character engages with real people in conversation, asking questions and guiding the readers or viewers through the investigation of real events. In "The 37th State", the screenwriter/author deployed the interview technique to ask important questions that attempt to reveal the delicate nature of Nigerian polity.

Interviews conducted by a real subject, Nico and a real radio show (Jolly Express) with partly fictionalized interviewees and a fictionalized podcast discussing real issues of national importance. Critical questions like:

- i. How can the attention of the Nigerian masses be drawn to the perpetual tricks politicians play against them?
- ii. How do the Nigerian masses encourage the fraudulent politicians to trick them and get their mandates during the election cycle despite several failed promises?
- iii. Have some political actors in power weaponized some agencies of government against their political opponents?
- iv. Are INEC officials used to compromise elections?
- v. Do electoral tribunals take the place of voters in deciding who is elected into political offices?
- vi. Why do politicians desperately seek to retain power?
- vii. Do the Nigerian masses realize the power of their votes?
- viii. Who are the key players in the act of subverting the will of the people during election?
- ix. Is it possible to clean the Nigerian electoral system?
- x. Have Nigerian politicians weaponized poverty and hunger?

These important questions form the basis of Nico's interaction with different guests who make concerted efforts to answer them, thereby shedding light on elections in Nigeria to the masses. The fictional characters use factual data in responding to these questions. Also, Nico echoes Bar. Adai's findings and leaks about General in the Jolly Express radio programme and his personal podcast channel on YouTube with over a million young subscribers, which he created as part of efforts to expose the antics of General and other politicians to the masses. Nico invites Bar. Adai (his surrogate) and Angel, his girlfriend, at the peak of their campaign against General and corrupt politicians, to his fictitious podcast. During the podcast, they made reference to real events happening during the filmic period. A real



sound bite of Seun Okinbaloye, a real popular broadcast journalist, host of Politics Today & Sunday Politics on Channels TV (Nigeria's award-winning television station), and host of @themiconpodcast interviewing Femi Falana, a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN), human rights activist, and former President of the West Africa Bar Association (WABA). This factual video can be found on YouTube ³⁰

The screenwriter/author uses both real and invented characters in the podcast scene to investigate one of the aforementioned questions: Does the electoral tribunal take the place of voters in deciding who is elected into political offices?

As Iwuh and Patrick noted, "The medium of docufiction allows the authors to investigate and tell their personal stories through invented characters and use the real characters and events to serve as evidence. The fictional characters created serve as mouthpieces and the story drivers of the authors"³¹. The injection of an actual interview into a fictitious one gives the author an opportunity to discuss real, relevant events happening in his country. In this case, the author uses real and fictitious characters as surrogates to reveal and comment on the judicial anomalies in Nigeria.

Representing the Author's Experiences: In docufiction consisting of dramatizations or reenactments of actual events, a character who takes part in or observes those events directly could serve as the author's proxy. The author's feelings and experiences may be embodied in this character. In achieving this, "*The 37th State*" deploys the self-insertion technique (a technique used by design to introduce the author into the story as a character) to recount the author's personal experiences. The inclusion of a real campus radio program, Jolly Express Show, is one of the primary forms of self-insertion found within "*The 37th State*". The screenwriter/author and his colleagues hosted the show under their respective stage names. Specific episodes delving into matters such as electoral corruption and voter education were incorporated into the storylines, alongside real-life callers offering their opinions on current events. Additionally, a fictionalized version was also created where the protagonist, Adai, participated in an interview segment of the real broadcast station.

³⁰ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqOTRnihnZ4&t=1772s>).

³¹ Iwuh, John and Patrick, N. A. (2022), 'Reading the docufiction script: Harnessing the thin line between facts and fiction', *Journal of Screenwriting*, 13:3, pp. 375-87, https://doi.org/10.1386/josc_00107_1



The second insertion was on Election Day, when the author met with one of the prominent callers on the show and a university staff member called Baba Plenty in their voting centre not far from the school campus. Baba Plenty saw people buying votes despite the strict measures put in place to curb monetary inducement, especially the ban on old N200, N500, and N1000 Nigerian notes placed by the Nigerian Federal government and central bank ([businessday. ng](http://businessday.ng)), which brought untold hardship on Nigerians. He called the author's attention to come and witness first-hand the anomalies of vote buying taking place during the election. These real election day experiences are captured in a scene with the real subjects using their real names and participating in real events in real time, representing a typical docufiction format.

NICO

Jesus! What is going on here?
It means all the untold hardship
brought upon Nigerians because
of federal government's reduction
of money in circulation and the
Naira redesign policy is in vain?

BABA PLENTY

Na so my brother. It is sad.

NICO

What is the usefulness of the
security personnel? (52)

The author also recounted how both Nico (himself) and Baba Plenty went back to the voter's register and searched for Nico's name but could not find it. They decided to go back to their original polling units. Baba Plenty found his name, but Nico still could not find his. He was advised to check another polling unit about two kilometres away, and he did. On reaching there, Baba Plenty called and informed him that his name was found at the back of their venue. Angry Nico returns and sees another level of electoral malpractice he has never anticipated. He sees agents of some parties writing the names and bank account numbers of voters after they confirm that those voters vote for their party. Nico decides to meet the lady writing names and asks.

NICO

Good day, madam!

(smiles and scratches his neck)
Please, ma, I'm just curious.
What is the list for?

LADY
(Looks at Nico suspiciously)
Who are you?
Nico tries to make her feel comfortable by showing her his voter's card.

NICO
(smiles)
I am a voter here. I'm just arriving.

LADY
(a bit relaxed and responds in pidgin English)
Well, the list is for the people who
vote for our candidate. You vote, we
confirm, and we send you a thank you alert later.

NICO
How will you confirm that I voted for you?
And how am I sure that you'll send me
a thank you?

LADY
(smiles)
Don't worry about that; we have our ways.
(53)

Nico turns and sees a man positioned beside the cubicle that is supposed to provide privacy for voters during the voting process, monitoring how voters vote in full view of another security agent. While some of his colleagues try to manage people in the queue, the security personnel comfortably fall asleep. The author inserted this real event, which he witnessed, in the story to boost its credibility.

Reflecting the Author's Values: The author surrogate can represent the author's ideals, convictions, or viewpoints, acting as a channel for the author to communicate their thoughts on the topics covered in the docufiction. This may give the ostensibly objective documentary components a subjective touch. In *"The 37th State"* the screenwriter created fictitious characters and events to comment on and suggest possible reactions to inspire Nigerians to wake up and act against the cruelty of politicians who hijack the reins of power and perpetually



dominate them. The screenwriter volunteers as a co-host and commentator of "Jolly Express", a pidgin English programme designed to reach local audiences with news and current affairs on his campus. This gives the author an opportunity to come across news and trending events as they occur and critically analyze those issues.

The author incorporated these experiences into "*The 37th State*" which was inspired by Nigeria's February 2023 general elections. As the election approached, the security challenges gradually started fizzling out, to everyone's surprise, making election campaigns and voter education the top priority. Like many individuals and entities, the author connected insecurity to bad governance. Seeing the electoral process as the remedy to bad governance and insecurity, the author joins the campaign against electoral malpractices through the radio medium and makes the electoral process the central focus of his ongoing doctoral thesis, which attempts to analyze the far-reaching consequences of electoral malpractices and violence on Nigeria's democracy, socio-economic development, and international reputation and highlighting how the erosion of public trust in the electoral process undermines citizens' confidence in their government, weakens institutions, and perpetuates a culture of impunity, through screenwriting as a method of research inquiry. As the author's surrogate, Bar Adai is imbued with the author's activism and desire for concrete action that will lead to a positive transformation in his society.

Bar. Adai manifests that in different scenes after being made to pass through several hurdles by the author. We see that when Bar. Adai and his girlfriend Angel reconcile after realizing that Gen. had been using them as pawns to advance his political ambition by killing Bar. Adai's parents and sponsoring his law schools so he could have his undivided loyalty and planting Angel in INEC for the purpose of election rigging using her father's dark secrets as leverage against her and, in the process, impregnating her despite knowing her relationship with Bar. Adai. Bar. Adai and Angel pretend to fully support General but organize a robust underground resistance group in which they constantly leak General's Secrets to them, and they, in turn, leak them to the public. General launches an investigation against the group and discovers that Bar. Adai and Angel are the masterminds behind the group, and he confronts them.

GENERAL

(angrily)

After all I have done for you?



Why did you betray me? I trusted you.

BAR. ADAI

(with a smirk on his face speaks
in pidgin English)

Are you kidding me? After all you
have done to us, you still want us to
help you cheat us again, right?
(chuckles and looks at him
straight in the eyes)

cheating us is your right, right?"

GENERAL

(shocks but quickly snaps out
and gives a burst of sarcastic laughter)
Yea, Cheating you is my right and
There is nothing you can do about it.

ANGEL

Hmmmmmm, we shall see then.(70)

The author uses to this hot exchange of words the author reflects the bewilderment and shock at the confidence that politicians exhibit when demanding votes and favours from the masses despite their failings and hidden intentions, which lay bear before sensible people was forged. General's lines, "After all I have done for you? Why did you guys betray me? I trusted you." reveal the hidden intention of politicians when they grant favours. The goal is to get something bigger from the masses. And Bar. Adai's reply, "After all you have done to us, you still want us to help you cheat us? Shey cheating us na your right abi?" shows him as someone whose eyes are open after the terrible experience he had in the hands of General. These questions and confrontation are designed to open the eyes of Nigerians and stir them to act against the antics of the corrupt politicians, especially Angel's lines "Hmmmm, we shall see then", which elicits determination. Hence, the author designed the two questions "You want to make I help you cheat me? " The 37th State"" to become the basis of Bar. Adai and Angel's campaign. Despite threats, intimidation and physical attacks, the duo launched a campaign against corrupt politicians.



Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored various narrative techniques used in framing and identifying author surrogates' role in "The 37th State" an academic docufiction screenplay. They navigate the narrative, serve as interviewers and documentarians, represent the author's experience(s) and reflect the author's values. After examining the use of author surrogate characters in a docufiction, it becomes apparent that this genre can go beyond traditional storytelling boundaries. Hence, it becomes evident that ethical considerations are integral to the landscape of this genre. However, by intentionally blending fact and fiction through these characters, authors can create narratives that reflect their perspectives on actual events and challenge conventional ideas about truth and imagination.

Finally, this study broadens our understanding not only of docufiction but also of storytelling as a whole. The ever-evolving nature of narratives, the dynamic interplay between truth and imagination and how author surrogates influence audience reception all highlight the importance of ongoing dialogue and exploration within the expanding boundaries of docufiction. As we navigate this complex landscape, we are reminded that docufiction, with its authors taking the lead, prompts us to reexamine our preconceived ideas of what is real and encourages us to engage in a more nuanced understanding.