

HORNS UP, PETER PAN! – NARRATING MODERN METAL ROCKUMENTARIES

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Abstract

With the rise of metal as a major music market in the 1980s, heavy metal became the topic of many films and TV series. Along with the changes in the music industry after the millennium, rockumentaries depicting metal and hard rock became a liable market on their own. Among their evolving techniques are increasingly fiction film oriented narratives aiming to appeal to broader audiences. The paper aims to introduce rockumentaries as a mode of filmic organization and explain how Modern Metal-Rockumentaries are written – from independent success “Anvil – The Story of Anvil” (2008), over Lamb Of God's “As The Palaces Burn” (2014) to Metallica's million-dollar-failure “Through The Never” (2013).

Introduction

For decades audio-visual rockumentaries have been an important tool to market music. Despite the documentary claim inherent in the term, their production is influenced by a strong financial impact of the music industry and an overall sympathetic attitude of the filmmaker towards its subject. With the rise of metal as a major music market in the 80s, the genre became the topic of many films and TV series – at first as part of MTV's prime days, then in the 2000s when rockumentaries (re-)conquered all screens from cinema to mobile gadgets. Along with the changes in the music industry after the millennium, rockumentaries depicting metal and hard rock became a liable market of their own. But especially cinema rockumentaries had to step up to a new level of entertainment, aiming to create a crowd beyond the metal scene. Among their evolving techniques are increasingly fiction film oriented narratives, which not only aim to show a certain story present at an event but actually create a new story based on the documentary footage provided. Especially concert and tour films are now based on story arcs and well-written characters – re-thinking and actively shaping the image of the modern metal scene.

The rockumentary mode

The rockumentary is a mode of presentation within the broader category of music film. They are distinguishable from others, such as *Fictional Music Films* – for instance musicals and biopics –, more experimental *Visual Music Art*, and *Music Documentaries*, through their specific concept of aesthetics, production and purpose. The rockumentary can be understood as an audio-visual promotional piece of pop music culture in the tradition of the industrial film. And like the industrial film, which itself is often organized under the category of documentary film (cf. Heymer and Vonderau, 407), rockumentaries are technically documentations of factuality. The portmanteau of “rock” and “documentary” suggests the documentary impetus, which derives from the early concept of its formats.

Although there are earlier forms, the mode starts as part of 1960s Direct Cinema movement, during which festivals and tours become increasingly popular subjects of film production, with young filmmakers being hired by the organizers to present and represent the event. In the tradition of Direct Cinema, these filmmakers – although sympathetic towards their subjects – understand themselves as a “fly on the wall” (Grant 2012, 28), as they are trying to refrain from any form of personal or technical interference. The Direct Cinema era of rockumentary production extends to the late 1970s and ends with the start of MTV. Not only is the channel, and the growing media conglomerate behind it, a key momentum of TV history, acknowledging and monetizing the existence of a young home video audience, it is also a major player in the promotional concept of the aggregated music entertainment industry itself. While in retrospective MTV is associated with the music videos it aired, the channel never produced them. As it grew over the course the 1980s, however, the add-on program surrounding and eventually replacing the music videos included a variety of rockumentary formats – from 30-minute features of bands to live concerts. With the increasing media diversity and the rise of digital media after the millennium, the importance of niche channels on television noticeably ceases. At the same time the music and entertainment industry fails to adequately adjust to the new working conditions as concurring factors such as digitization, globalization and an overall slowing world economy macerate their financially strong position. With the 2000s digital and eventually mobile gadgets, a more diverse musical world and extenuated entrance restrictions to the entertainment industry create the second caesura in rockumentary history, effectively ending the MTV era. The Modern Rockumentary era sees the emergence of digital rockumentaries as well as the return of high-quality rockumentaries to cinema.

Theaters have been one important platform for rockumentaries since the Direct Cinema era. It is the box office success of festival rockumentaries such as *Monterey Pop* (USA, 1968) or *Woodstock* (USA, 1970), which turns the genres in the mode into an important promotional market of itself. Robert Strachan and Marion Leonard therefore rightly find that “rock documentaries cannot be separated from the industrial context in which they are produced” (2009, 284), moreover:

“Rockumentaries [...] conform easily to the promotional needs of the music recording industry. They tend to be distinguished by a sympathetic perspective of the filmmaker or presenter towards the subject – they represent an effort to present the breadth of a musical artist's talent, comparatively uncritical portrayals of their performances and the nature of their appeal to the audiences” (Roscoe and Hight 2001, 119).

The mythology of rock extends to these films, but is also kept alive by them, explains Roy Shuker: “Such films capture particular moments in 'rock history', while at the same time validating particular musical styles and performers” (2008, 155). It is the intricacy of rockumentary filmmaking to combine documentary footage and a perhaps contradictory sympathetic approach to create a movie with entertainment value, which at best appeals not only to the fans of the music but a broader audience as well. The entertainment value is enforced through an increasing propinquity to fiction film features – especially including the specific aesthetics of the rockumentary mode. Over the decades the portrayal of the material turned from the Direct Cinema approach to a flawless and highly stylized form of depiction, strongly influenced by MTV's music video aesthetics. While the structure of films like *The Band – The Last Waltz*

(USA, 1978) already relied on a script, most films repeated existing formula preset by procedures within the music industry such as tours, concerts or album recordings. Over the 1980s and 90s rock-mockumentaries like *This Is Spinal Tap* (USA, 1984) or fictional music films like *Wayne's World* (USA, 1992) started to aesthetically resemble cinema rockumentaries – adapting to their use of music, pace and cutting techniques. As a result, rockumentaries in return were forced to improve their entertainization through distinctive stories instead of simply relying on formula and star appearances.

Storywriting between trueness and fiction film

With the boom of high-end documentaries after the millennium (cf. de Jong 2008, 136), niche markets are reopened to theatrical releases: “as these documentaries share a focus on the intimate, private world of individuals – a domain they share with their fictional counterpart” (ibid.). The metal scene is such a working niche market with international appeal, although its depiction is particularly problematic regarding the aforementioned intricacy. A successful metal film of the Modern Rockumentary era has to satisfy the scene's specific demands regarding authenticity while at the same time be accessible enough to interest remote parts of the scene and a more general public in a certain subgenre or period of metal music.

In metal, the concept of authenticity might be best explained through the term 'trueness', although the idea behind it does not apply to all parts of the scene equally. George Lundskow describes metal fandom as follows: “Real metal also means more to the fans than just a catchy song. It is an attitude and a way of life, and for the true fan, a religious experience” (2008, 377). For the various subgenres of metal this fandom implies varying dress codes – from denim to corpse paint –, rituals and musical topics, all of which are unironically embraced and represented. When looking at images in the Black Metal scene Jan Grünwald noted that trueness implies a claim for truth and can be used synonymously with 'seriousness' (cf. Grünwald 2012, 188). In his book on Extreme Metal Keith Kahn-Harris explains: “[Lawrence] Grossberg argues that in postmodernity authenticity remains an important value in rock – as it is in extreme metal where to be 'true' and not 'trendy' is paramount – but an authenticity that acknowledges the impossibility of differentiating between the authentic and inauthentic” (2007, 145). According to Kahn-Harris the scene can be best understood through reflexive anti-reflexivity, meaning the idea “of knowing better but deciding not to know” (ibid.).

This is the basis for a dichotomic understanding of metal films. The same movie scene can have a different meaning to a metal fan than a regular movie-goer. When watching *Last Days Here* (USA, 2011) the cinema audience sees Bobby Liebling as a drug-addicted failure, a metal fan looks past his depicted situation and acknowledges the impact his band Pentagram has had on doom metal. Even though the fan is aware of the alternative reading, his approach is emotional and sympathetic. He is most often supporting (musicians) or declining (anything endangering music making) and might even excuse any behavior of the protagonists, for instance by referring to them as nonconformist geniuses. Especially regarding the images of sympathetic losers, however, this approach only works if the filmmakers embrace the scene's concept of trueness. The entertainment value of rockumentary protagonists lies within the arrangement of their actions to fit a certain image. In metal movies trueness is the gauge of this image so that the movie does not deride the scene itself. To dissolve these complex requirements, many films of the Modern Rockumen-

tary era simplify a situation to turn it into a presentable, straight storyline by focusing on one specific aspect at a time or even overall. While music documentaries are usually designed bottom-up, meaning the filmmaker gathers material and then develops some form of narrative, most modern rockumentaries are written top-down, with the footage material fitting the story. The writing is mainly influenced by already existing Hollywood film tropes and story arcs, which match the established working patterns within the industry.

Anvil – The Story of Anvil (USA, 2008)

In *Anvil! – The Story Of Anvil* (ATSA) filmmaker Sasha Gervasi follows up on the fate of Canadian heavy metal band Anvil, for whom he had worked as a roadie back in the 1980s. After their second and third album – “Metal on Metal” (1982) and “Forged in Fire” (1983) – became classics in the genre, a lack of management and misfortune terminated the career of the band. While the band turned into a footnote in metal music annals for most fans, the aspiration of the singer and lead guitarist Steve “Lips” Kudlow and drummer Robb Reiner never ceased. They continued to record albums, while working straining day jobs to provide for their families. Having been their roadie and fan Gervasi decided to take a huge financial risk and tell the story of the two protagonists, even taking a second mortgage on his house to pay for the film (cf. Cieply 2009).

For some rockumentaries the bottom-up procedure is the only way to make sense of unpredictable footage. After a short introduction into the band's history, the story of ATSA follows Anvil on a catastrophic tour and during their attempts to produce and get signed with their album “This is Thirteen” (2007). Since the band still lacks management, their attempts to be successful are unfocused and chaotic – resulting in a lot of unstructured footage. Gervasi turns the material into a tour-rockumentary. Its narrative is road-movie-like, “defined by aspects of the mis-en-scène (minimally a road, usually a car, bus or other vehicle) and the thematics (travel, escape, self-discovery) that are closely related to the mis-en-scène” (Robertson Wojcik 2010, 7). Anvil are constantly shown using cars, planes or trains to reach the next step of their tour. The journey is structured through an alternation of hope and disappointment regarding the band's career, with a variety of obstacles from criminal club owners to major labels. After a lot of set backs, the narrative structure can be punctuated with a large crowd at a festival in Japan, which eventually serves as proof of the band's seemingly foolish self-belief. ATSA does not require any knowledge of metal music – to the contrary: An important factor of ATSA's narrative is its matching soundtrack, consisting of slow acoustic songs. Even though the film depicts their tour, the band's own heavy metal material is mostly abridged. There are rather repeated indications of their main hit 'Metal on Metal', which is only played in a longer version during the finale.

This conscious inclusion of non-metal fans is a typical reaction to the financial risk modern metal movies impose on their producers if they are not affiliated with the music industry. After the production Gervasi had to invest an amount in “the upper hundred thousands' [...] to distribute the film through a company called Abramorama, while selling the DVD and television rights to VH1” (Cieply 2009). Due to the clever connection of a universally appealing narrative and a metal-scene-oriented subtext the reception from both critics and regular audiences was predominantly positive and eventually the project created around a million dollar revenue worldwide. A successful metal rockumentary can gross its production and distribution costs, but since there was no

music industry behind the band Gervasi's actual success lies in helping the band to achieve success in the business for a second time.

Lamb of God – As The Palaces Burn (USA, 2014)

The key to success for independent production companies is “[f]inding a story, unearthing hidden stories and gaining unique access to the people involved, to archived material or to a location is a way for the small independents to create a strong negotiating position in the field” (de Jong 2012, 50). Rockumentarian Don Argott first proved this ability with *Rock School* (USA, 2005), a documentation on a teacher and his school band which – allegedly coincidentally – bore a strong resemblance to the plot of the box office hit *School of Rock* (USA, 2003). After the success of *Last Days Here* (USA, 2011), he was commissioned by the manager of American metal band Lamb of God to portray the band's fans all around the world.

The result, Lamb of God's *As The Palaces Burn* (ATPB), is an example of a top-down-procedure that had to be subordinated and rearranged to match a changing situation. The movie was intended to be classic rockumentary material, but then shifted into a rather personal picture of the band. Reason for the change was the unexpected arrest of singer Randy Blythe in the Czech Republic, where he was summoned to court for the death of a Czech fan after a concert two years prior. Argott's narratives, in general, have a rather dark undertone best comparable to dramas by focusing on people in an existential crisis. Even the opening sequences about the fans, which he incorporates to show the value of Lamb of God's music for their fans, focus on loss and isolation. The fans depicted are outsiders in an often violent society, where they have to deal with death and oppression. In these situations 'trueness' becomes a mode of self-protection since: “Heavy metal corresponds to the condition of alienation and the feelings that arise from it” (Lundskow 2008, 377). The fans share this perception with Blythe, who stands at the center of the main story arc.

The narrative itself is told in the present tense reflecting the uncertainty of the situation and the isolation Blythe has faced in the foreign country and judicial system. This coding of scene empathy is important since, as mentioned earlier, a reliance on 'trueness' to create an audience within a wider metal scene can even be problematic if the band or subgenre is too eclectic. Coming from an American hardcore background with major label affiliation, Lamb of God are not regarded as 'true' from a more traditional Heavy Metal perspective. It is therefore vital to narratively associate them with metal culture while at the same time explaining metal to a broader audience. The film achieves this through the hearings in court and talks with their lawyer where the originalities of the scene are explained. Despite its dark undertone and topic the film hence remains in the rockumentary mode by openly siding with the band and their singer. Argott primarily uses popular American interview partners within the metal scene to emphasizing the stress the accusation puts on the band.

As a side effect these interview partners provided credibility regarding the band's trueness and this – combined with the motif of alienation and salvation through metal music – was reflected in the reception of the movie. With secured financing, selected screening dates and without box office numbers the success of the rockumentary is difficult to determine. From the census on review summary sites its impact, however, seems to align with Ben Rayner's review for the Toronto Star: “You don't need to like Lamb of God's music – alt-

hough, for the record, you should because it's awesome – to walk away from As the Palaces Burn feeling genuinely fond of the band” (Rayner 2014).

Metallica – Through The Never (USA, 2013)

Metallica's discography includes a variety of concert films, most of them specifically written in a top-down-manner to support the performance on stage. Their concert fiction film *Metallica – Through The Never* (TTN) is the logical consequence of those movies, as it combines a fictional story with a scripted stage performance pertaining to their concert film *Cunning Stunts* (USA, 1998). Only knowing they wanted a story in between the performance, the band reached out to gather concepts and eventually decided to use the one of fiction film director Nimród Antal, which was the only one to not involve sci-fi elements (cf. Bishop 2013). With a production budget of \$18 million, 24 3-D-cameras guitarist Kirk Hammett explained that the concept was to create something “different and unique” instead of the “formulaic” concert film format (ibid.).

There are two intertwined story arcs in the structure of TTN. One depicts a concert on stage, where everything seems to go fatally wrong, the other follows their roadie who is sent to retrieve a mysterious bag. The name of the roadie, Trip, presets his story arc as he get trapped in a surreal, violent situation in the downtown area of the unnamed city the concert takes place. The main disadvantage of the two plots is their inaccessibility as they have no visible connection. The reason is a combination of amateurish ambition and bad story writing, considering that even drummer Lars Ulrich at one point admitted: “I’ve spent three years working on this movie and I don’t have any idea what [the narrative] means” (Rosenberg 2013). The roadie seem to contribute nothing to the concert and – even apart from the disastrous progress of the show – the question arises why the band would play a concert in a city where gang violence erupts into a gory war. The underlying difficulty is the fact that, even if completely staged as in TTN, the concert film is the genre in the rockumentary mode closest to documentation and therefore locating the action in the same city is confusing. The commitment of Antal was certainly intended to create a scenario close to a horror film, yet for metal fan the war-scenario might rather feel like an unpleasant allusion to the riots that happened during a Metallica concert in Jakarta in 1993.

TTN's international box office performance of \$9 million seems like a decent result compared to other films of the concert film format. Yet, the production cost and probably equally high marketing campaign made the film completely unprofitable in proportion to the created revenue. Moreover, the success of the movie renders almost irrelevant looking at other high-budget concert films such as *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never* (USA, 2011, \$73,000,000) or Katy Perry's *Part Of Me* (USA, 2012, \$25,000,000). The critical reception of the film was mixed with most critics commending the concert scenes and ridiculing the fiction film parts.

Losers of Hollywood format

From the beginning of the mode, specifically the commissioned production *Dont Look Back* (USA, 1967), rockumentaries were either focused on showing specific facets of a rock star persona or – as, for instance, *Gimme Shelter* (USA, 1970) – a specific emotional setting of a period or an event. To apply to both metalheads and a broader audience the construction of many, but not only, metal rockumentary protagonists has to be at the same time modern and

simple and nostalgic and multilayered. This is achieved through a stereotypical character design combined with a variety of cultural references which do not contribute to the overall comprehensibility of the film but are rather allusions a fan can decipher. The concept used to present the protagonists of modern rockumentaries is based on the importance of stereotypes already created in fiction film history. Carl Platinga sums up the stereotype theory as follows:

“audiences often see individual characters not only as individuals but as actual social types, and that such ways of seeing or responding to those types have implications outside of the movie theater. When character traits congeal into bundles that are repeated over and over again [...] a stereotype is born that resonates in the way we see actual people” (Platinga 2009, 201)

The most popular stereotype used in metal film history actually roots in the self-perception of the genre and the overall depiction of heavy music in music film from the 70s onwards: the young rebel. It is a combination of the free outlaw, like the protagonists in *Easy Rider* (USA, 1969), and the harmless dreamer Peter Pan. Referring to the aforementioned problem of alienation, Arnett identified seven key institutions “that either fail to exert meaningful control, or in fact encourage and reward an antisocial ethic or selfish individualism”: “family, peers, school, neighborhood, the media, the legal system, and cultural values” (Lundskow 2008, 377). Through statements given in talking head situations the protagonists in metal rockumentaries locate themselves in situations where they are alienated. In the beginning of ATPB Randy Blythe states that “Music is the only reason why I’m not in prison”, confessing his deep fear that some ominous entity is going to take away the luck he has to live his life as a musician. For the musicians in Anvil music is the most important aspect of their life. It appears as if they never aimed to achieve anything outside of it except, maybe, having a family. Yet it is those families through which their desperate pursue of self-fulfillment becomes apparent. Their behavior is characterized by a certain selfishness, even ruthlessness, made visible through the resigned attitude of their wives. Just like Peter Pan, the characters hardly function in regular society, reject it even by making a youth-related culture their only outlet. For the average movie-goer the entertainment value lies in a character design close to classical melodram, where the protagonists “are not victims pure and simple. They are people whom we admire; indeed, often we admire them for the way in which they negotiate their misfortune” (Carroll 2003, 75). For metal fans watching those protagonists, the idea of the supporting community takes on an important role. They understand the alienation through the law, uncomprehending families or the music business because it is implemented in their own view of the metal scene. But furthermore, they also seek to replace all failing institutions with the metal community – for instance through buying the Anvil album after watching the film.

It is important to note that the loser protagonist of rockumentaries does not exist in vacuo – and that for fans his character design mainly works through allusions. For the average movie-goer the blatant and bitter irony of Blythe’s prison statement – the implication that creating metal saved Blythe but killed a fan of the band – creates the emotion behind the narrative. For metal fans, due to the nature of the judicial hearing, metal itself seems to be in the dock. The references used by interview partners commenting on the situation, such as the general fear of bands to be attacked on stage since the murder of Dimebag Darrell in 2004, are hardly understandable for outsiders but they consciously channel the emotions of fans. Equally, the marketing campaign and trailer of ATSA seem to reflect the goofy nature of singer Kudlow – and are

therefore not true. Yet, the humorous overtones of the film are reflected in a peculiar accumulation of references to the mockumentary classic *This Is Spinal Tap* (USA, 1984) in the life of the Canadian band. It is the honest dedication of the band in combination with these references that creates the authentic credibility needed.

Given these assumptions, it is apparent that TTN failed to appeal to audiences not only because of the story, but also because of the way it presents its loser protagonist. At first glance, the young roadie, played by rising Hollywood star Dane DeHaan, is a picture book rebel – his acting even gained him the role as James Dean in the biopic *Life* (USA, 2015). The character design of the Metallica movie is, of course, the most problematic compared to the ones previously mentioned. The character Trip is fictitious, but the script fails in at least admitting a remote resemblance to an actual person. He also remains silent throughout the whole movie. There is no knowledgeable story to the protagonist a movie-goer can relate to, especially given that a variety of surreal nightmare-scenarios happen to the roadie on his way – none of which are explained. Moreover, while many Metallica fans have short hair these days, his clothes and hair give him the notion of a metal fashion catalogue model instead of a true fan. His seemingly brand new leather jacket and an unostentatious band shirt, only sporting a Metallica logo in the same color as his hoodie jacket, are too stylish to be authentic – furthering the scene's scepticism about the remaining trueness of Metallica themselves.

Conclusion

Whether the material of modern rockumentaries is organized top-down or bottom-up is mainly a matter of the production circumstances. A processing of the material to create a compelling story afterwards, however, is best achieved through existing fiction film tropes and genres – such as road movies or melodrama. A part of this is the use of stereotypes, like the loser protagonist, who is often a grown-up guy yet young at heart because of his eternal love for metal music. He has dreams, but becomes his biggest obstacle on the way to reaching them. This specific stereotype of rockumentary character design works best in dramatic narratives with a happy ending. To function, the loser protagonist needs to have elements of identification as well as allusions to the scene in general, since the movie will otherwise fail to attract to his core audience. It also appears as if filmmakers close to the scene, at best fans themselves, are more likely to successfully use these allusions, inside jokes and implied references, probably because they themselves are identifying with the role they attribute to the protagonists.

Looking at narratives and character design is of course only a small part in the analysis of modern rockumentaries, or on a wider margin even films in general. Another aspect of potential further research is the use and role of music in music film, which in ATSA, for instance, is surprisingly mellow. This could indicate another reason why TTN, although brilliantly recorded and mixed, was not successful. There might have been a time when cinema rockumentaries could generate an audience through rock bands. Looking at the pop rockumentaries mentioned earlier, the box office truth, however, is that the bigger intersection between rockumentaries and cinema-goers these days lies with pop stars and that it takes more than the casting of Dane DeHaan for metal rockumentaries to appeal to their audience as well.

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