MOCKING THE PEOPLE: POPULIST AESTHETICS AND THE POLITICS OF SATIRE IN CONTEMPORARY MOCKUMENTARY

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how contemporary mockumentaries critique populist discourse by appropriating and subverting documentary aesthetics. Through comparative analysis of Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* and Netflix's *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021*, it traces how strategies of satire, irony, and staged authenticity expose the emotional and visual grammars of nationalism and post-truth politics. Combining discourse theory with close formal analysis, the study argues that mockumentary's reflexive play with evidence and performance unsettles claims to immediacy and "common sense" central to populism, inviting active, skeptical spectatorship across distinct cultural and industrial contexts.

KEYWORDS

mockumentary, populism, satire, theatrical satire, political aesthetics

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, populism has emerged as one of the most widespread and destabilizing forces in global politics. Once considered a marginal or episodic style of political engagement, populism now constitutes a central feature of electoral strategies, political rhetoric, and media spectacle across Europe and beyond.

From the anti-immigrant slogans of Hungary's Fidesz party and the ideological rigidity of Poland's Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), to the media-savvy bombast of leaders like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, populist movements have reshaped the landscape of liberal democracies by claiming to speak directly for *the people*, a category often defined in opposition to elites, outsiders, or abstract enemies of the nation.

In parallel, populism has cultivated a highly visual and emotionally resonant media presence, relying on spectacle, affect, and simplified messaging to generate mass appeal. As populism increasingly operates through the logics of image, performance, and repetition, the role of screen media in amplifying, reframing, or contesting its discourse has become crucial to understanding its cultural force.

Within this context, the mockumentary, a hybrid genre that fuses documentary realism with fictional or satirical content, offers a unique critical position. Mockumentaries exploit the codes of factual storytelling (talking-head interviews, archival material, voice-over narration) only to subvert them, foregrounding their own intentional construction and inviting viewers to question the authority of media forms. In doing so, they not only parody specific political figures or events but also engage more broadly with the affective and visual grammars that make populism persuasive.

This paper explores the ways in which mockumentary functions as a mode of political and aesthetic resistance to populist discourse. It focuses on three case studies: Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* (2022), and the Netflix-produced *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021* (dir. Al Campbell & Alice Mathias). While situated in distinct national and stylistic traditions, Eastern European documentary satire on the one hand, and Anglo-American television parody on the other, these films share a commitment to exposing the contradictions and absurdities of populist rhetoric.

The central argument of this article is that the mockumentary's power lies not only in its satirical content but also in its formal *modus operandi*: its play with authenticity, its staging of affect, and its invitation to distrust the surfaces of media truth. In a time when populist movements claim to bypass institutional filters and speak directly to the people, the mockumentary serves as a counter-genre, one that insists on mediation, complexity, and irony.

In recent years, the mockumentary has gained prominence as a comedic or entertainment format *and* as a politically charged genre capable of interrogating contemporary ideologies. With its hybrid status, blending documentary aesthetics with fictional content, it enables a unique form of critical reflection on the nature of media truth, representation, and performance. Originating in 20th-century film and television, the mockumentary has evolved from marginal satire to a globally distributed format. This evolution corresponds with the rise of media-savvy populist leaders and digitally fragmented information ecosystems, where irony, misinformation, deepfake and spectacle converge. In this confusing environment, mockumentaries increasingly serve both as mirrors and critiques of populist communication, offering viewers an opportunity to decode political spectacle and question the legitimacy of institutional narratives.

Theoretical Framework

Populism, though diverse in content, typically divides society into two opposing camps: the pure people and the corrupt elite. Cas Mudde defines populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that simplifies complex political realities into moral binaries[1]. This ideological reduction allows populist leaders to portray themselves

as embodiments of the people's will, drawing legitimacy not from institutions, but from direct identification with "the people" and mass sentiment.

Ernesto Laclau's discourse-theoretical model deepens this perspective by presenting populism as a logic of articulation. Populist discourse, according to Laclau, constructs an equivalential chain among heterogeneous social demands, consolidating them into a collective identity that opposes a common antagonist: "the system," "the elite," or "globalists"[2]. This articulation is not incidental to politics but *is* politics at its most elemental: the creation of subjects, identities, and oppositions through discourse.

Further elaborating the cultural dimension, Margaret Canovan distinguishes between two faces of populism: the redemptive and the pragmatic[3]. The redemptive aspect promises national renewal and moral purification, often grounded in mythic pasts. In contrast, the pragmatic dimension arises from populism's role within representative democracies. Mockumentary, as a hybrid genre, is particularly attuned to exploring these tensions: it can parody redemptive narratives while exposing the contradictions of pragmatic political action.

More recently, Benjamin Moffitt's concept of populism as a political style shifts the focus from ideology to performance. For Moffitt, populism is best understood not only through what it says but how it behaves: it thrives on spectacle, crisis narration, and affective intensity[4]. Populists frequently position themselves as underdogs or rebels, speaking in vernacular tones and staging direct confrontations with journalists, institutions, or public norms. In such performances, media presence is constitutive of populist power.

Silvio Waisbord's notion of post-truth populism sharpens this media critique. In a fragmented media landscape where facts are personalized and truth is contingent on identity, populism succeeds by aligning itself with emotional authenticity rather than empirical verifiability[5]. It offers moral clarity and affective resonance in place

of complexity and nuance, conditions under which spectacle eclipses deliberation.

The mockumentary emerges as a genre strategically positioned to counteract this logic. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight define mockumentary as a form that borrows the codes of documentary realism to construct fictional or semi-fictional narratives, thereby foregrounding the artificiality of documentary conventions[6]. In appropriating and distorting these conventions (interviews, expert testimony, archival images, direct address) mockumentaries invite skepticism toward mediated truth.

As Linda Hutcheon notes, parody and irony operate through "authorized transgression".[7] They derive their force not from total rejection but from strategic mimicry, an internal critique from within the form. The mockumentary's ironic gaze compels the audience to reflect on the construction of meaning, whether that meaning is encoded in political speeches, cultural rituals, or media representations.

Geoffrey Baym adds that satire, especially in the age of infotainment, functions as a "discursive integration" that combines news, narrative, and performance to offer metacommentary on media itself[8]. This is crucial in the case of populism, where political spectacle often overwhelms rational discourse. The mockumentary, by deconstructing spectacle through form, becomes a powerful diagnostic and rhetorical tool.

This paper adopts a method of comparative cultural analysis informed by discourse theory and media aesthetics. Mixing close formal reading with attention to cultural and political context, it seeks to reveal how mockumentaries critique populist rhetoric and expose the media systems that enable it.

The two case studies explored in this article, Romanian-Hungarian director Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* and Netflix's *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021*, have been chosen to represent a spectrum of mockumentary practices that critique populist ideologies across cultural and industrial contexts. While Lakatos's

work is rooted in Eastern European nationalist discourse and employs an intimate, auteur-driven aesthetic, Brooker's Netflix specials operate through fast-paced, globally marketed satire fueled by celebrity performances and platform-based production. Together, they exemplify how mockumentary can function at both national and transnational level to question the visual grammar and emotional rhetoric of populism.

Case Study: *Whose Dog Am I?* Satirizing ethnic purity and populist myth

Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* (2022) offers a satirical dismantling of ethnic nationalism through the unlikely metaphor of canine identity. A Hungarian filmmaker born and based in Romania, Lakatos teaches film at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania in Cluj and is known for blending reflexive documentary with performance. As both director and protagonist, he embarks on an absurd quest to determine the "true Hungarian dog", effectively parodying the essentialist logic of identity politics in both Hungarian and Romanian populist discourse.

The film's context is key. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz government, has promoted a homogenizing ethno-nationalist narrative centered on Hungarian purity, historical grievance, and cultural exceptionalism. However, the Romanian side is no less entangled in nationalist rhetoric. In recent years, Romanian populist parties like the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), led by George Simion, and SOS Romania, under Diana Șoșoacă, and, more recently Călin Georgescu, the pro-Russian politician who almost became President, have pushed radical ethno-nationalist and anti-globalist agendas to over 20 percent of the Romanian vote. These figures present themselves as guardians of Romanian identity against perceived threats: EU integration, Hungarian irredentism, minority rights, and pandemic restrictions. Their discourse often features anti-Hungarian tropes and appeals to autochthonous purity, an ideological mirror of Orbán's rhetoric.[9]

Lakatos, as a Romanian citizen of Hungarian ethnicity, is well positioned to satirize both discourses. His identity disrupts the binary frameworks both populisms depend on. In *Whose Dog Am I?*, this disruption takes the form of a dog-breeding allegory. Pedigree, bloodline, and selective mating become proxies for the language of national belonging. The filmmaker's journey leads him through interviews with breeders, nationalist historians, and self-appointed cultural gatekeepers who articulate increasingly absurd definitions of purity. The film's central irony lies in the fact that these definitions are not scientific, but ideological, a fact underscored by the use of parodic DNA tests and pseudo-historical reconstructions.

While *Whose Dog Am I?* is rooted in documentary realism, it is unmistakably a mockumentary in structure, tone, and intent. The film draws directly on the tradition of hybrid documentary forms that critique their own construction, manipulating factual conventions to prompt critical reflection. Like canonical mockumentaries (*Zelig*, *Borat*, *This is Spinal Tap*), it embraces an aesthetic of straight-faced absurdity. But unlike many Anglo-American examples, Lakatos's mockumentary is quieter, more observational, and deeply embedded in local cultural codes.

Visually, the film mimics investigative documentaries, employing formal restraint, static compositions, and diegetic sound to simulate authenticity. Yet the narrative is structured around performative contradiction. Lakatos performs sincerity while the content of the interviews devolves into ideological farce. This tension between form and content creates a rich ironic field that mirrors the contradictions inherent in nationalist populism. The satire is brought to front by the actual dog's "dialogues", as they mimic their master's themes, in a most humorous way: Lakatos lets them "speak" through comic-book inspired dialogue boxes.

The film also critiques how populist rhetoric embeds itself in everyday practices. Dog breeders proudly assert the superiority of national breeds, echoing the language of cultural exclusivism. The repetition of these claims, never questioned, always asserted,

parallels how populist talking points circulate unchallenged in media and public discourse. Lakatos refrains from overt ridicule. Instead, he uses editing, juxtaposition, and silence to allow viewers to witness the absurdity for themselves.

One of the film's formal strategies is its meticulous replication of documentary tropes: handheld cinematography, interviews in realist settings, archival footage, and scientific diagrams are all used to lend authority to the film's otherwise absurd narrative. This tension, between realism of form and absurdity of content, is the hallmark of the mockumentary. The viewer is invited to momentarily suspend disbelief, only to later become aware of the fiction through tonal shifts, contradictions, or implausible claims. This reflexivity is what Roscoe and Hight describe as a "third-order realism", a space where the documentary illusion is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed[10].

Whose Dog Am I? parodies populist obsession with ethnic purity and the documentary genre itself, especially its use in national mythmaking. It recalls historical instances where film has served nation-building ideologies, whether in Communist-era Romanian cinema or nationalist Hungarian documentary traditions. Lakatos flips this dynamic by turning the state's search for cultural essence into a personal, ironic quest that spirals into nonsense.

Crucially, Lakatos does not resolve the narrative with revelation or clarity. The quest for the "Hungarian dog" ends in ambiguity and failure, an anti-closure that subverts the catharsis expected in populist storytelling, which typically resolves crisis through the restoration of mythic order. This aesthetic resistance to resolution is itself a political act. By refusing to offer answers, the film models a way of thinking beyond binary oppositions and essentialist identity.

As a film theoretician, Lakatos also invites viewers to reflect on the mediating structures of knowledge. The documentary form, traditionally associated with truth, is turned inside out. Every truth claim becomes suspect. The title itself, *Whose Dog Am I?*, destabilizes

subjectivity: it implies that identity is a function of power, ownership, and classification. In a populist world where leaders claim to define the nation's essence, this question becomes urgent: *who gets to define whom*?

In the Romanian context, the relevance of this critique is amplified. AUR's discourse has increasingly targeted minorities, particularly Hungarians and Roma, while simultaneously appropriating populist tropes from global far-right movements. Diana Șoșoacă's rhetoric fuses conspiracy theory, Orthodox fundamentalism, and ultranationalist nostalgia into a potent media performance. Georgescu uses myths, conspiracies, movie quotes and pseudo-science to emphasize the greatness of the Romanian people to its most uneducated members. All of them have built their platforms on distrust of institutions and elites, a distrust mirrored in the populist style of Lakatos's mockumentary, albeit reversed in critical orientation.

Whose Dog Am I? shows the unique power of the mockumentary to expose the absurdities of populist ideology while simultaneously interrogating the media forms through which such ideology is produced and consumed. In the Romanian and Hungarian context, where documentary has long served as a vehicle for nationalist representation, Lakatos's film stands as a counter-genre: one that embraces reflexivity, irony, and formal complexity as tools of political critique.

Whose Dog Am I? goes beyond simply mocking nationalism. It breaks down the structures of feeling, power, and media that allow nationalism to appear natural. Through form, performance, and allegory, the film reveals the arbitrary foundations of ethnic essentialism and challenges viewers to see identity not as given, but as constructed, manipulated, and performed.

Case Study: *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021*. Mockumentary as populist debunking in media-saturated democracies

The Netflix specials *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021*, produced by Broke and Bones and created by Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones, adopt the mockumentary form as a mechanism for both cultural catharsis and political critique. Though less regionally anchored than Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?*, these productions function as transatlantic commentaries on the rise of populist spectacle, media saturation, and the collapse of coherent political narrative in liberal democracies.

Styled as retrospective documentaries, both specials present fictional talking-head interviews alongside real news footage from the tumultuous events of their respective years, marked by many natural and political disasters, but particularly by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As media products, they are significant not only for their content but for their promotional strategies and cultural positioning. Released globally on a leading streaming platform, both specials were marketed using the language of urgent retrospection: "The year you couldn't forget. Now you can't look away", tapping into a collective cultural fatigue. Their trailers, posters, and teaser materials emphasized both immediacy and star power, foregrounding a cast of internationally known actors: Samuel L. Jackson, Hugh Grant, Lisa Kudrow, Tracey Ullman, and Kumail Nanjiani, among others. These casting choices were not incidental. Each performer plays a hyperbolic stereotype of media figures or public voices: from a misinformed citizen to a Trumpist spokesperson, transforming familiar political roles into comic archetypes.

Laurence Fishburne's voice provides the films' distinctive, deadpan voice-over that ties together the satirical interviews and mock-news segments, giving the productions a pseudo-documentary tone, similar to David Attenborough-style narration, but with a dark comedic edge.

The inclusion of these high-profile actors serves multiple functions. First, it allows for a mimetic mirroring of real-world celebrity culture, particularly the role of celebrities in political discourse. Second, it blurs the line between satire and entertainment. The audience is drawn in by star appeal but confronted with narratives that disrupt passive consumption. Hugh Grant's portrayal of Tennyson Foss, a skeptical historian prone to revisionist perspectives, exemplifies this. His persona mocks both the pomp of elite commentary and the brittleness of institutional authority.

Crucially, *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021* must be read as extensions of Brooker's earlier project: *Black Mirror*. While *Black Mirror* explores dystopian futures shaped by surveillance, gamification, and techno-capitalism, these specials turn their gaze to the recent past, showing that dystopia is no longer speculative, it is contemporary. The aesthetics of cynicism, fragmentation, and emotional flattening that define *Black Mirror* are retooled here for satirical retrospection. The question is no longer what technology will do to us, but how media, ideology, and performance have already created a feedback loop of collective disorientation.

Netflix's promotional campaign for *Death to 2020* deliberately capitalized on the cultural capital of *Black Mirror*. Marketing materials, trailers, and social media teasers emphasized the shared creative team and tonal resemblance between the two productions. The campaign adopted the visual and rhetorical style of *Black Mirror*, sleek black backgrounds, glitch aesthetics, and sardonic taglines, to frame *Death to 2020* as a real-world extension of the series' dystopian satire.

This strategy positioned the mockumentary not merely as a comedy special but as a meta-commentary on the absurdity of recent history, inviting viewers to experience 2020 itself as a "*Black Mirror* episode come to life".

And the resulting collage, a mixture of scripted parody, improvisational comedy, and archival documentation, uses the

mockumentary form to confront the absurdity of real-world politics. Characters such as Dash Bracket (Samuel L. Jackson), a jaded reporter, and Gemma Nerrick (Diane Morgan), a clueless millennial, serve as exaggerated avatars of media personas and ordinary citizens whose perspectives are fragmented, ill-informed, or over-saturated. These archetypes represent the broader condition of a citizenry overwhelmed by political and informational chaos.

The mockumentary framework allows the creators to blend fiction with reality in ways that disorient viewers' expectations of truth and narrative structure. In particular, the use of staged interviews mimicking political commentary destabilizes traditional genre boundaries. This is intensified by the insertion of real video footage from press conferences, viral clips, and political rallies, especially those involving populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Jair Bolsonaro.

The fact that many real-life excerpts appear more grotesque or exaggerated than their fictional counterparts becomes a key point of critique. The result is an inversion of the expected logic of satire: reality outpaces fiction.

These mockumentaries are deeply reflexive in form. They continuously break the fourth wall, reference their own scriptwriters, and question the purpose of year-end review shows themselves. This self-awareness distinguishes them from mere comedy and situates them within the lineage of satirical mockumentary as critical media practice. As Baym argues, hybrid satirical forms like *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight* operate within what he calls a "discursive integration", where narrative, critique, and humor blend to reflect on the media's complicity in the political events it reports[11].

In *Death to 2020/2021*, this media critique is made explicit: news media is portrayed as both voyeur and cheerleader in the theater of populist performance.

Furthermore, the films reflect the exhaustion and fragmentation of the audience's political attention. Rather than

culminating in a coherent narrative of the year's events, the structure is episodic, fragmented, and often contradictory. These formal strategies mirror the affective conditions of post-truth populism, anger, irony, cynicism, fatigue, and implicate the viewer as a participant in this media ecology. The audience is not offered clarity or closure, but instead a kaleidoscopic view of mediated catastrophe.

Brooker's use of the mockumentary genre is strategic. It permits a critical distance from the source material while simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of critique in a world where entertainment and political spectacle are indistinguishable. Unlike traditional documentaries, which attempt to document and interpret history, these works parody the very impossibility of doing so in an environment where narrative authority has collapsed.

In the Netflix ecosystem, these specials also represent a calculated move. Positioned as international comedy content, they reach a broad audience outside traditional national broadcasting constraints. Yet, their critique is deeply Anglo-American, focusing on the cultural and political implosions of the U.S. and U.K. in the late 2010s and early 2020s. This geopolitical focus underscores the uneven distribution of media satire: while mockumentary emerges globally, its dominant tropes remain rooted in English-speaking liberal democracies.

Death to 2020 and *Death to 2021* function as satires of populism, but also as expressions of political disillusionment in the face of systemic incoherence. Their comedy is less about laughter and more about despair rendered entertaining, a tone that perfectly matches the surreal logic of populist communication, where truth is secondary to emotional appeal, repetition, and identity affirmation.

Finally, the specials invite reflection on the limits of satire itself. By exaggerating political dysfunction and media excess, they risk numbing the viewer, rather than mobilizing critique. In many reviews, critics noted this ambivalence. The mockumentary becomes a balm for disillusioned audiences, offering catharsis without

consequence, laughter without resolution. Yet, this too is a political gesture: it holds up a mirror to spectatorship, more than to power asking whether irony is enough in an era of entrenched populism.

Speaking truth to power is now extended, as *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021* expand the mockumentary tradition by integrating celebrity culture, global media strategies, and postmodern genre awareness into a biting, if ambivalent, critique of populist spectacle.

Comparative Analysis

The two case studies, *Whose Dog Am I?* and *Death to 2020/2021*, represent distinct but convergent uses of mockumentary as a tool for political and cultural critique. While emerging from different national contexts and stylistic traditions, both interrogate the mechanisms of populist discourse, avoiding direct polemic, through formal disruption, satire, and aesthetic estrangement. Their similarities reveal how the mockumentary genre, across its diverse ways of existing, has developed into a powerful mode for exposing ideological inconsistencies, emotional manipulation, and the mediated construction of political truth.

Mockumentary as a genre has a long and complex lineage, one that traverses national cinemas, artistic movements, and technological shifts. Originating as early as Orson Welles's infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast (1938) and Peter Watkins's *The War Game* (1965), the genre evolved from documentary realism and theatrical satire.

In the late 20th century, it took more overtly comic forms with works such as Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), Christopher Guest's serial mockumentary career (*Waiting for Guffman*, 1996, *Best in Show*, 2000, *A Mighty Wind*, 2003, *For Your Consideration*, 2006, and *Mascots*, 2016), and Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat* and *Borat Subsequent Movie Film* (2006 and 2020), blending improvisation with sociopolitical commentary. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight describe mockumentary as operating through the aesthetic markers of

documentary (interviews, archival footage, voice-over) not to assert truth but to destabilize it[12]

This destabilization is central to both Lakatos and Brooker's projects. In *Whose Dog Am I?*, documentary aesthetics are used to parody the pseudo-scientific pretensions of nationalist ideology. The mock-ethnographic interviews, genealogy charts, and staged historical re-enactments closely mimic state-sponsored documentaries used throughout Central and Eastern Europe to consolidate myths of ethnic continuity. Yet Lakatos subverts these conventions through tone, structure, and absurdity, highlighting the arbitrariness of identity construction and the circular logic of populist essentialism.

Brooker's *Death to 2020/2021*, by contrast, appropriates the rapid-fire pace and fragmented structure of infotainment media. In its celebrity-filled performances and scripted parody interviews, the films channel the affective chaos of populist media environments. Like *Black Mirror*, these works reflect a world where emotional appeal has displaced rational deliberation, and where the blending of fact and fiction is no longer exceptional but standard. Here, the mockumentary does not mimic truth, it parodies the crisis of knowing itself.

Despite their divergent styles, Lakatos's slow, intimate absurdity and Brooker's frenetic collage, both projects emphasize the performativity of populist discourse. Populist leaders present themselves as embodiments of "the people", employing accessible language, emotional resonance, and media spectacle to bypass institutional critique. The mockumentary form is uniquely suited to expose this performance. It allows filmmakers to inhabit and exaggerate populist modes of speech, while simultaneously pulling back the curtain on their way of constructing reality.

The films also highlight the complicity of media systems in populist ascendance. Lakatos points to the role of nationalist historical narratives and bureaucratic institutions in manufacturing ethnic identity. Brooker critiques the infotainment logic of

contemporary news media, where political dysfunction is repackaged as entertainment. In doing so, the mockumentaries extend the genre's long-standing tradition of institutional satire, dating back to *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *The Rutles*, into the realm of digital disinformation and social media echo chambers.

Perhaps the most crucial role of these mockumentaries is that they invite active viewership. Unlike traditional documentaries, which may foster identification or moral clarity, mockumentary creates distance, suspicion, and critical reflexivity. It breaks the illusion of objectivity and demands that viewers interrogate their own assumptions. This is especially vital in the context of populism, where political engagement is often reduced to spectacle, and where emotional certainty displaces complexity.

Whose Dog Am I? and *Death to 2020/2021* exemplify the mockumentary's evolution from niche parody to a globally resonant form of political critique. They show how the genre can adapt to different cultural registers: Hungarian-Romanian border politics, Anglo-American media meltdown, while maintaining a shared function: to disrupt the aesthetic, emotional, and ideological scaffolding of populist authority.

Conclusion: mockumentary and the spectacle of populism

In an era increasingly defined by ideological polarization, emotional politics, and post-truth rhetoric, the mockumentary has emerged as one of the most effective cultural forms for interrogating the aesthetics of populism. Through irony, parody, and formal destabilization, it creates a space for critical reflection on the narratives, rituals, and media performances that underpin contemporary populist discourse. This article has explored how *Whose Dog Am I?* and *Death to 2020/2021* deploy mockumentary strategies to unmask the absurdities of populist logic and question the media environments in which it thrives.

Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* demonstrates how the mockumentary can operate within local, ethnically charged

contexts to reveal the ideological scaffolding of nationalism. By embedding himself in the role of a self-critical protagonist, Lakatos interrogates the language of ethnic purity, genealogy, and institutional legitimacy with dry wit and formal precision. His film resists closure, favoring ambiguity and irony over moralizing, thereby mirroring the elaborate construction of all nationalist narratives. In the Romanian and Hungarian political climate, where populist figures like Simion, Georgescu and Șoșoacă mobilize identity as a weapon, this form of cultural critique is both timely and subversive.

By contrast, Charlie Brooker's Netflix mockumentaries offer a globalized, media-savvy form of satire that is fast-paced, image-saturated, and deeply cynical. Drawing on Brooker's *Black Mirror* sensibility and the style of infotainment, *Death to 2020/2021* parody the very frameworks through which political discourse is consumed. The inclusion of celebrities, scripted talking-heads, and rapid-fire montage mirrors the noise of contemporary political communication and also implicates the viewer in a spectacle that is both ridiculous and inescapable. In doing so, these mockumentaries highlight the erosion of narrative coherence in liberal democracies and the affective disorientation that populism both exploits and intensifies.

Yet, the significance of these films rests not merely in their content but in their form. The mockumentary is not just a vessel for satire, it is a genre that foregrounds the act of mediation itself. It draws attention to how images are constructed, how stories are told, and how truth is framed and reframed through performance. This reflexivity is especially important in the age of populism, where leaders style themselves as outsiders while mastering media performance, and where factuality is routinely subordinated to emotional and symbolic resonance.

These works raise questions about the role of satire in political life. Can mockumentary move beyond catharsis to provoke meaningful engagement? Or does it risk becoming part of the

problem, a form of ironic detachment that neutralizes critique? The tension is real. Both Lakatos and Brooker seem aware of this ambivalence. Their films do not offer utopian alternatives or blueprints for action. Instead, they ask viewers to dwell in contradiction, to confront the absurdity of their media environment, and to question the stories they are told, whether by politicians, journalists, or filmmakers themselves.

Ultimately, mockumentary offers a space where viewers can become conscious of the very tools that shape their perception of reality. In times of populist ascendancy, when spectacle, simplification, and emotional manipulation dominate the public sphere, this genre serves a vital democratic function. It may not change the world, but it sharpens the viewer's ability to see through it.

Whose Dog Am I? and *Death to 2020/2021* are far more than just products created for the sake of entertainment. They remind us that in a world saturated by image, the politics of representation is not peripheral, it is central. And in that world, mockumentary's greatest power is to make us laugh not to forget, but to remember what we're being shown, and why.

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