The Use of Documentary Codes in Political Parody: *Heritage Minutes* and the Conservative Party of Canada

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Introduction

*Heritage Minutes* is a short film series that documents or highlights influential events and figures taken from Canadian history. Since the release of its first film in 1991 (Reid, 2013), *Heritage Minutes* has become a staple of Canadian culture as Canadians all over the country connect through stories of national heroes, events and accomplishments. Most of the films contain reenactment of real life events, voice over, narration, a location and year specified at the beginning of each clip and dramatic music. Due to its iconic imagery and style however, *Heritage Minutes* have been subject to parody by comedians, musicians and most recently, the Conservative Party of Canada. In a hit piece against Justin Trudeau, Canada’s current Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party published a short film which directly copied the style of *Heritage Minutes*, documenting the alleged crimes of Justin Trudeau and his administration. Immediately after its release, this video was faced with disapproval from Historica Canada, the organization that produces *Heritage Minutes*, and was taken down due to its misleading nature (Scheel, 2019) only to be re-uploaded later with a disclaimer preceding the video. This paper argues that the Conservative Party’s piece is problematic in that it was able to utilize codes of documentary to replicate the style of *Heritage Minutes* and take advantage of an institution that is trusted among Canadians, all in order to further their political agenda. This will be proven through an analysis of different elements of documentary including drama-documentary, mockumentary and propaganda present in the parody as well as in original *Heritage Minutes* clips, which will help to highlight *Heritage Minutes*’ place among documentary media and to situate this parody as an unethical artifact.

**Brief History of Heritage Minutes and Elements of Documentary seen in the films**

Developed during a time of political divide in the 1990s, the *Heritage Minutes* were meant to excite Canadians about their shared history and to promote a sense of national identity
among viewers when a shared identity was not always apparent (Rukszto, 2008). According to author Rukszto (2008), the makers of the series would prioritize dramatic filmmaking over informative filmmaking so as to create a space where viewers were not only gaining historical information but were able to “emotionally connect to other Canadians” over the films (p. 177).

The *Heritage Minutes (HM)* are a rich text, not only in their portrayal of unique Canadian stories but in the elements of documentary that are included across the various episodes. Because the films have been directed by many filmmakers, each short film is unique in its style, highlighting different codes of documentary including the following examples: voice of God narration through first person storytelling or unseen voices, which can be linked to propaganda style documentaries; elements of drama-documentary which typically include historical footage or reenactments of historical events; elements of documentary drama in which form does not always conform to a realist narrative; as well as montage which is used to evoke feeling and can be seen in poetic documentary. Each of these codes of documentary are used purposefully by the filmmakers and are particular in what they convey to an audience. Before analyzing the Conservative Party’s parody film, it is important to understand how it is that *Heritage Minutes* utilizes these codes in order to communicate their message of Canadian nationalism.

A prevalent code used in *HM* is voice of God narration, which is understood by scholars of documentary to be rhetorical, taken for granted and authoritative (Landesman, 2008, p. 37), as viewers are expected to absorb the knowledge that is given to them as fact. An example of this can be seen in almost every episode of *HM* as each clip is concluded with a voice that summarizes the life of the figure or the event depicted, and describes its effect on broader Canadian history. This voice over narration can also be used for dramatic effect (Roscoe & Hight, p. 49) and helps the filmmaker to present their argument explicitly. Voice over is often paired with dignified music, which helps to convey certain feelings among viewers. A good
example of this can be seen in the propaganda style film *The River* by Pare Lorentz, which pairs an authoritative voice with orchestral music to evoke feelings of pride among American audiences toward their country (Snyder, 1968). *HM* also structures each film as a narrative instead of as an argument. This is a component of drama documentary in which films do not always "look like [documentaries], although [they] may include footage or accurate recreations … of historical events" (2001, p. 48). In these instances of drama documentary, accurate representations of real figures reinforces the factuality of each film (Roscoe and Hight, p. 48) and helps to accomplish *HM*’s goal of transforming public opinion by highlighting real stories of Canadian heroism and excellence. *HM* films also portray fictitious scenes that are not typical of the realist narrative structure, which are used for emphasis as well. This can be seen in the “Lucy Maud Montgomery” film where the filmmaker portrays the fictional character Anne of Green Gables in order to dramatize the film (Dunn, 2018). Lastly, montage is utilized within the series in order to disrupt space and time, conveying a more affective message to the viewer. An example of this can be seen in “Vancouver Asahi”, which depicts the troubles of the Vancouver based Japanese baseball team as its members were displaced during the Japanese internment (Corkle). All of these codes throughout *HM* are utilized in some way to say something about Canadian nationalism.

**Brief Description of Conservative Parody**

The parody film from the Conservative Party begins with a short clip of Parliament Hill, the location of Canada’s national parliament buildings, with the location and time of the film presented at the bottom of the frame, reading “Ottawa - Ontario, 2019”. A male narrator then begins to describe the high distinction of past Canadian prime ministers, contrasting them with Trudeau’s shortcomings as clips of him from past speeches or from news stories play throughout. Specific news stories which highlight the alleged crimes or scandals committed by
the Liberal administration are shown as well, as the narrator details how Canada has never had a prime minister who has broken so many ethics or conflict of interest laws before (Conservative Party of Canada). Clips of Trudeau stuttering or sounding unsure while speaking are utilized as well to show, albeit briefly, Trudeau’s inadequacy as a leader. Finally, a short video of Trudeau shaking hands with other world leaders is overlaid against an image of an orange sunset, which is a copy of one of HM’s most iconic images.

**Drama documentary**

Drama-documentary films are those that operate with the intention of being interpreted in the same way that a documentary would, despite the fact that it may not be able to capture or represent content through explicit documentary methods (Roscoe and Hight, 2001 p. 45). This method might be used when there are no records or witnesses of certain events, for example. Put briefly by Kilborn and Izod (1997), drama documentaries will dramatize aspects of a film while still maintaining discourses of factuality (within Roscoe and Hight, p. 46). In the Conservative Party’s parody, an example of this can be seen in the sequence in which the narrator describes the various crimes which were allowed by the Liberal Party of Canada. As he does, clips from the corresponding news stories of each scandal are displayed while dramatic music plays in the background to create a feeling of nationalism and a desire for justice. Large numbers adding up the money that Trudeau allegedly spent on a limousine ride for a campaign volunteer are shown in large characters as well, all to create a dramatic effect (Conservative Party of Canada). The choice of the filmmakers to include news footage is notable, as this convention is helpful in authenticating an event as well as the information that is being presented (Roscoe and Hight, 2001, p. 48). In terms of its portrayal of these stories however, this sequence is concerning, as an audience member could potentially accept the presented claims on the grounds that they are notable enough to have been covered on the news.
However, no opposing perspectives of these stories are presented, leaving an audience with questionable information, and an affective feeling swayed in one direction due to the heightened sense of drama. Similar to the way that many HM films are structured as narratives as opposed to arguments, the Conservative parody also utilizes this code to seemingly walk the viewer through a story as if it is inherently true, as opposed to convincing an audience to believe one side. According to Roscoe and Hight (2001), the use of news footage or indirect texts may be due to the lack of available evidence (p. 45), but this fact may not always be known among viewers. This sequence also utilizes montage which creates a subtle and smooth transition into each new story. This both fragments time and disrupts space (Leach, 1998, p. 158), omitting the various backstories and opposing opinions of each story. The seamless transitions present in this parody are just another component that is meant to be absorbed without a second thought. This is also true of many components of parody seen in the film, which directly imitate many tropes of HM.

**Mockumentary and parody**

Defined loosely as a fictional text that appropriates documentary codes and has a reflexive stance toward the documentary genre (Roscoe and Hight, 2001, p. 46), mockumentary is a unique style of film which can be seen in many modern texts including comedy verite films, TV shows, or found footage style films among others. Through the blurring of fact and fiction, mockumentary style films are typically meant to undermine the institutions and authority of documentary (Roscoe and Hight, p. 47), oftentimes using parody as a method to do this. Roscoe and Hight state that the intentions of parody are usually to challenge the assumptions and expectations that are associated with documentary’s factual discourse (2001, p. 47), but oftentimes reveal their in-authenticity or absurdity throughout the film. The film in question however is unique as its motives differ from the typical intention of parody. In the case of the
Conservative Party’s parody, it seems as though it is not meant to interrogate the actual style of film, but is meant to utilize it to directly attack the subject of the film, Justin Trudeau. In this way, the parody becomes misleading as it is not explicit to the viewer that it is, in fact, a parody. This unique use of parody contrasts with Roscoe and Hight, who claim that “the appropriation of documentary codes and conventions is used not so much to anchor the argument in the real world or to bolster claims to truth” (p. 50) but is meant for commentary. Mast (2009) on the other hand, considers this stance to be one sided, quoting Juhasz and Lerner who state that fiction films which make use of documentary codes may do this intentionally to acquire their associated feelings of trust and authenticity (within Mast, p. 236). This alternate use of parody can be seen in a blatant example of the Conservative Party’s attempt to mislead audiences. Seen below is the final shot of the Conservative parody, which is a close copy to the final end card of some older HM films. Side by side, one can easily notice similarities between the two images as each image centres a screencap from their film on top of an orange sunset over water, with logos filling the bottom third of the image (see Figures 1 and 2). “Heritage Minutes” is also predominantly displayed with the parody accurately copying the spacing of the letters to match the original.

Figure 1. Heritage Minutes: Jacques Cartier. [Image]. (1991). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfKr-D5VDBU

Figure 2. Conservative Party - Heritage Minute parody. [Image]. (2019). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcmkuogePOM&t=4s
At quick glance, these two images appear to be similar enough to be a part of the same series. Despite the fact that Historica Canada has rebranded several times and is using a different end card currently, this image is still recognizable as Historica Canada themselves pointed out that the phrases and images used in the parody are “long associated with the Minutes” (HistoricaCanada, 2019). In the parody, the Conservative Party’s logo is shown with a short note at the bottom of the frame that reads “Authorized by the Chief Agent of the Conservative Party of Canada”, implying the approval of the Conservative leader, Andrew Scheer. This is the only indication of the film’s affiliation with the Conservative Party. Other similar tropes were directly copied including the slogan “A part of our heritage” which is placed at the end of every HM film. A comparison can be seen by looking at Figures 3 and 4.

The clear imitation of these well known components of HM is concerning as some members of the public may not immediately identify that the film is a parody. According to Lamarre and Landreville, it has been found that “documentaries as a form of political information, have the potential to strongly influence public opinion” (2009, p. 550). The fact that the film is one minute long is also concerning as alleged facts are delivered very quickly and authoritatively. The brevity of the film could potentially lead to automatic trust among viewers, as some scholars note that persuasion is more likely to occur when viewers have a shorter amount
of time to process or think critically about what they have watched (Cialdini within Simpson, 1994, p. 104). While most mockumentaries assume that an audience can recognize a fake text as elements of fiction are slowly revealed, this film arguably does not make that assumption, as viewers are meant to accept all the given claims from the beginning of the film to the end. By using documentary codes to condition viewers to think a certain way politically, this film enters the world of propaganda, which has been utilized by many documentary filmmakers in order to communicate ideas which are motivated by ideology.

**Propaganda**

In the 1920s and 1930s, propaganda style films grew in prevalence as various institutions searched for a way to convey ideas to audiences during times of war or national hardship. According to Leach, propaganda style films typically make their intentions clear by stating what they believe explicitly (1998, p. 163). Scenes and footage are then chosen carefully as they are meant to communicate and proliferate ideological ideas. In the *HM* parody from the Conservative Party, this is accomplished through voice over which presents ideas with certainty and authority. This can be seen in just the first few seconds of the parody as an even and authoritative voice describes several alleged crimes committed by Prime Minister Trudeau (Conservative Party of Canada, 2019). When looking at propaganda in efforts to mislead or indoctrinate audiences, use of voice over is notable—Van Gorp describes how voice over or narration, which can be heavily biased despite its seemingly informative nature, “[guides] its public from start to finish” (p. 512), using speech that is rhythmic and that sounds reliable in order to convince an audience of something (2011). In the case of the Conservative Party’s parody, viewers are subject to information that may or may not be true, which is presented in a way that leaves no space for disagreement or argumentation. The presentation of this piece of political propaganda in a documentary style is concerning as scholars have noted the
dangerous nature of documentary content to be widely considered as inherently real or trustworthy (Roscoe and Hight, 2001, p. 48).

Conclusion

*Heritage Minutes* has been an iconic institution among Canadians since its creation in the 1990s, as it highlights important events and figures from Canada’s history. Because of its easily identifiable components, the Conservative Party of Canada created a short film parodying its style in which Canada’s current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is attacked. This short film utilizes codes of documentary in order to convey political messages to their audiences, including elements of drama documentary, mockumentary or parody and propaganda. By creating a direct imitation of *Heritage Minutes*’ font and branding, as well as by using film tactics like dramatic music, montage and voice over, this parody has the potential to be misleading as it conveys a message, seemingly in the voice of a non-partisan institution, while in actuality has deep biases and political motivations behind it.
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**Filmography**

