

Cornelia Lund

# The Real Fake

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## The Real Fake Strategies of Audiovisual Authenticity in the Videos of Kourtrajmé and *The Dix*

— Cornelia Lund

“There is a tendency within hip-hop to make all manner of rules: one thing is ‘real,’ another is ‘fake.’ It is about ‘authenticity,’ about being ‘true to the game.’”<sup>1</sup> In this view, authenticity appears as one of the core values of hip-hop culture, though not as an absolute one, but flanked with other explanatory terms. So how is authenticity defined within this context? Authenticity here becomes a parameter defined in relation to hip-hop culture, to its rules and codes.<sup>2</sup> Which also means that it cannot easily be recognized as such by everybody, only by those sufficiently familiar with the codes to subsequently decode them.<sup>3</sup> The rules are part of a “game” with the goal to position oneself as authentic—though the word “game” already hints at the fact that the desired authenticity is actually a staged one. In a game, roles will be enacted. What is “real” in a game might actually be “fake.”

The moment of *mise-en-scène* plays a seminal role in hip-hop culture, which largely defines itself through the medial presentation of its main musical leaders and role models, the MCs. The success of an MC in turn is tied to his credibility, and to gain proper authenticity as a representative of hip-hop he has to carefully cultivate his image.<sup>4</sup> Rappers present themselves as “bad guys,” as “gangstas” from the hood. Their authenticity is achieved by following a number of codes that regulate gestures and poses, clothing and attributes such as cars, heavy gold chains, and gold teeth. The image is cultivated mainly on stage in concerts, through the press, and in films—the latter mostly as music videos, although rappers can also appear in feature films, especially in action movies, where they strengthen their image as gangsters by impersonating such in leading roles or supporting characters. Here an overlap of the fictional and the real MC occurs in his image. A favorite storyline is that of the ghetto dweller who manages to rise out of dire circumstances by hard-fought success as a rapper, as told e.g. in *8 Mile* starring Eminem from 2002. Here the rapper’s credibility is heightened by his ghetto origins, which is especially important in Eminem’s case, since as a white person he by definition has less credibility as a rapper.

1.

While mainstream productions today seldom offer any surprises in the strategies they follow to gain the desired credibility, there are still productions within a hip-hop context that experiment with issues of “real” and “fake” and being “true to the game.” In the following, two experimental audiovisual strategies of authenticity will be presented

<sup>1</sup> “[...] innerhalb von HipHop gibt es die Tendenz, allerhand Regeln aufzustellen: Dieses ist ‘real’, anderes ‘fake’. Es geht um ‘Authentizität’, um ‘true to the game’ sein.” Heiko Behr. “DJ Shadow: Ex-Posterboy mit HipHop-Kater,” in: *Intro* 143 (2006), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> See Susanne Knaller. “Genealogie des ästhetischen Authentizitätsbegriffs,” in: Susanne Knaller, Harro Müller (eds.). *Authentizität: Diskussion eines ästhetischen Begriffs*. Munich: Fink, pp. 32ff.

<sup>3</sup> See Hans Ulrich Reck. “Authentizität als Hypothese und Material: Transformation eines Kunstmodells,” in: Knaller, Müller 2006, p. 259.

<sup>4</sup> While obviously there is a considerable number of female role models in hip-hop, the male form is chosen here since all the films discussed in this article have male “heroes.”

in the filmic works of Kourtrajmé and the DVD/CD production *The Dix: The Art of Picking Up Women*.

First for a short explanation of these two names: Kourtrajmé is a French collective of directors, musicians, actors, skaters, breakdancers, etc., whose main output consists of short films, as their name already tells us: Kourtrajmé is *verlan*—a French youth slang which switches the syllables of words around—and stands for *court métrage*, the French expression for short film. *The Dix*, on the other hand, is the name of a fictitious funk band, title heroes of a fake documentary produced by rappers from the circle of Prince Paul. In both the short films of Kourtrajmé and the fake documentation *The Dix*, the issue of authenticity is addressed and treated with playful irony in connection to both filmic images and music.

As their *verlan* name suggests, Kourtrajmé are committed to French youth culture, especially from the banlieues around Paris. It's in these French counterparts to U.S. ghettos that the (fictitious) Kourtrajmé gang lives, from which the protagonists of the short films are recruited. Among the collective's members are exponents of every activity vital to a hip-hop context: from MCs through sprayers to breakdancers, also including the indispensable decor of female beauties playfully called *kourtrajmeufs* (from *meufs* as a slang word for women). The collective itself is a form of organization not uncommon to hip-hop, just think of what is probably the most famous and commercially successful collective, the Wu Tang Clan (founded in 1992). This should not be taken to suggest that Kourtrajmé necessarily strive for commercial success. While they do produce music videos, these are seen by the collective as way of earning a living where great care has to be taken to protect their own aesthetic objectives from commercial demands and constraints.<sup>5</sup> In their explicitly audiovisual orientation, the short films of Kourtrajmé oscillate between experimental shorts and music video. A central objective of these films is defined by Romain Gavras, one of the collective's directors: "It is truly 50/50, image/sound and film/music."<sup>6</sup>

Musically and visually the film productions refer to hip-hop in the widest sense. They take up the issue of credibility in various ways. Here the documentary or pseudo-documentary approach deployed in many of the collective's films turns out to be crucial. It is used in different ways and on different levels. For example, the limits of the documentary are deliberately played on, or the identities of the actors blurred into their filmic identities: Olivier Bart becomes "Bart," and Vincent Cassel becomes "Vinz," and this is followed consistently throughout the films, even if they have no direct connection to another.

With *The Funk Hunt* (2000) by Romain Gavras, Kourtrajmé have dedicated a film to the history of a piece of music. The film follows this history—which is actually fictitious—from the tune's origins in the 1960s through various adventures in DJ land up to the crate "digger," who rediscovers it and helps it to a remix and subsequent

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Baurez. "Romain Gavras—Kim Chapiron: L'équipée sauvage," in: *Studio Magazine* 190 (2003), p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> "C'est vraiment 50/50, image/son et film/musique." Romain Gavras in: Chloé. "Kourtrajmé," in: *90BPM. Rhythm of the Day*, 2002, <http://www.90bpm.net/interview/2002/kourt.shtml>, date of access: January 1, 2006.

breakthrough to a larger audience. The historical view of the—correct—musical tradition of funk that is reiterated here, similarly forms the basis of the film *The Dix* and will be further analyzed when we come to that production.

In their aesthetic approach to film, Kourtrajmé refer to parameters of the documentary: they almost exclusively film digitally with a restless, unsteady hand camera that evokes the style of experimental documentaries. The camera often literally sticks to the protagonists' feet—or their skateboards, in the tradition of skating documentaries. Tracing the object very closely, the shaky hand camera seems to offer a subjective point of view, an author immediately apparent in the camera's movements. This medially points to the way the film was being made, instead of hiding the process, which seems to guarantee a sort of unaltered, unedited, and not least amateurish authenticity.<sup>7</sup> And indeed, images used by Kourtrajmé often start out as documentary footage, in the sense that they have not been filmed with a fictional context in mind. Sometimes the very real actions of skaters and sprayers will be shot, not everything here is staged for the camera. And yet, as these real episodes cannot be unequivocally spotted in the final film, an uncertainty about the state of the material always remains.

## 2.

An analysis of the short film *Mégalopolis* (2003) by Romain Gavras can paradigmatically show us how these strategies are used in actual filmic creations and how they function. The film's first scene takes place in a ghetto somewhere in Romania. It is filmed through a shaky hand camera; the original Romanian dialog has been subtitled. The scene and its aesthetics look straight out of a documentary film, recording an event that happens every day: Dimitru aka L'enfant de l'Est departs to find his luck in the West—as a breakdancer, we gather from the program on his onscreen TV set and from his clothing style. After saying goodbye to his parents, the camera accompanies him on his way to the train, following his every action down to his bowel movements. Once he's on the train, Dimitru's road to Paris is traced on a map—also a common device in documentary films to clarify spatial relationships. Having arrived in Paris and stolen a pair of sunglasses from a German tourist, Dimitru finds what he is looking for: a breakdance battle. And here the final break with the documentary mode occurs: Dimitru wins the battle with such laughable moves that nobody could possibly view this as documentary evidence of an authentic competition. Especially as the triumphant winner is surrounded by a digitally created aureole.<sup>8</sup>

Further episodes in *Mégalopolis* are not connected narratively but associatively through figures or motifs. After the battle, which took place in a parking house, the skaters move on to an episode in the

<sup>7</sup> Historically this approach can also be traced back to *cinéma vérité*; cf. Klaus Kreimeier. "Fingierter Dokumentarfilm und Strategien des Authentischen," in: Kay Hoffmann (ed.). *Trau—Schau—Wem: Digitalisierung und dokumentarische Form*. Close up: Schriften aus dem Haus des Dokumentarfilms 9, Konstanz: UVK Medien, 1997, pp. 40f.

<sup>8</sup> As it clearly moves into fiction, the film negates the "contract" with the viewer that forms the basis for the reception of documentaries as such (see Eva Hohenberger. "Dokumentarfilmtheorie: Ein historischer Überblick über Ansätze und Probleme," in: Hohenberger (ed.). *Bilder des Wirklichen: Texte zur Theorie des Dokumentarfilms*, Berlin: Vorwerk, 1998, p 25). The necessary "agreement on the referentiality of the filmic image" (Kreimeier 1997, p. 29) is thus led ad absurdum.

Paris metro. A sudden jump of locations from Paris back to Romania occurs three scenes later, and we see sprayers at work in the Bucharest metro—recognizable to us from its logo. The sprayers' faces are covered by digitally added black bars in the same way films with documentary elements use them to protect the identities of the persons involved. While that makes sense in a reportage or a documentary—since the sprayers work illegally—it is completely unnecessary in a fictional film, which *Mégalopolis* clearly has proved to be at latest with the breakdance battle scene. The device of the black bar signals a documentary authenticity for the scene which tears the viewer back out of the fictional narrative.

Following the Bucharest metro, there is the episode of an unsuccessful French rapper whose use of a golden American miracle microphone suddenly transports him center stage into a music video as an anglophone star MC. The video is actually the visualization of a track by The Notorious B.I.G. as remixed by DJ Mehdi, who has produced the complete music of *Mégalopolis*. The construction of this episode is more complex, though, than a short synopsis of the action suggests. The supposedly unsuccessful French rapper, who takes over the role of The Notorious B.I.G. in the music video, is actually Tekilatex, a member of the French crew TTC, who themselves are rather successful. There is a premonition of the rapper's metamorphosis when he buys his new mike over the telephone, since on the wall of his home behind him hangs a poster of the U.S. star. So Tekilatex is not the MC in the video. While the *mise-en-scène* suggests an authentic hip-hop video, this again is fictional, since the star of the video is not The Notorious B.I.G. himself, but his impersonation by Tekilatex. The strong ironic twist of this episode is amplified by the fact that the French musician can only overcome his rapping lack of success with the help of an American "Be a Star" microphone. Only through this device does he actually become a star with all the necessary hip-hop attributes—from his oversize coat through a chorus of dancing girls to his fat limousine. This American dream of a nobody achieving superstardom is unmasked as fiction in the end by one more appearance of Dimitru, who attacks the camera man and takes over the camera, after which the shooting of the film by members of the collective becomes visible within the film. Thus it ends with a sudden reentry of the "documentary" mode, as the director is caught on film seemingly by accident. At the same time, we know from previous episodes that Dimitru is part of the fiction, so the director oscillates within the same double status as other elements of the film.

For anyone still harboring doubts, the apotheosis of the star MC is qualified once and for all during the end credits, when the ironic twist of one rapper impersonating another is spelled out. This act of replacement also explores issues of the battle between MCs to find out who is the best. The battle is usually fought out through the lyrics, which are used for self-aggrandizing and dissing the other rappers. On first view, we might judge the French MC to be verbally inferior and beholden in admiration to The Notorious B.I.G., since he copies the U.S. star in his impersonation. And yet his act transfers the question of who is most accomplished at "staying true to the game" from the verbal to the filmic department. And here it is Tekilatex whose ironic take on a star performance, with his wildly exaggerated,

parodist handling of music video (his screamingly pink coat, the hugely clichéd appearances of the also pink, headscarf-decorated kourtrajmeufs, etc.) makes the true star appear ridiculous.

The film demonstrates a complete mastery of all the codes by going through the central musical and filmic ingredients of hip-hop culture one by one: the ghetto/*banlieue* and the subway/metro station as locations, the breakdance battle, plenty of rapping, skating, and spraying—all with a happy air of lawlessness, since sunglasses and pliers are stolen and graffiti sprayed illegally. The necessity to stay “true to the game” to gain the necessary credibility is acknowledged in references to documentary film as a guarantor of filmic authenticity. This reflection is continued in the play on music videos, from which Tekilatex in the end emerges as the winner of the battle of rappers. It appears that the “fake” (Tekilatex as The Notorious B.I.G.) is “more real than the real” (The Notorious B.I.G. himself)—because the deliberate and playful exploration of stylistic devices of the “real” points to the (real) power of the “fake”: its power over images.

3.

The name of the Kourtrajmé collective already contains a reference to short film, and their DVD packages seem to promise fiction film productions. In contrast, *The Dix: The Art of Picking Up Women* on first view presents itself as a straight documentary. The production is sold as a DVD that comes with an extra CD containing the songs of the band. A historicizing black-and-white photograph of the band on the cover seems to date back to the 1950s or '60s, judging from their clothes and the design of the microphone.

The film, which tells the story of “The Rise and the Fall of The Dix,” starts with authentic historical photographs from U.S. history, including a photo of Martin Luther King. This sequence of historical photographs is accompanied by a narrator who, in the emphatic style of the 1950s and '60s, praises The Dix as an outstanding example of the true sound of America. The presentation of historical photos and the text narration during this beginning clearly refer to codes for documentary films, which open a contract of trust with the viewer that forms the basis for the reception of documentary films.<sup>9</sup> This contract appears safely observed especially since the photographic references are from an era of analog photography—different from the film itself, which exists as a digital product. For such analog photographs the indexical character of the photographic image is still valid, and any possible manipulation of film stock can be reconstructed.<sup>10</sup>

After this introduction, which positions the band at its place in history, a photograph of its members as a group of children and adolescents is shown to reinforce their actual existence and origins. But this is the exact moment our belief in the authenticity of the narrative is first shaken, when the names of the members are introduced. They carry names like Don Johnsun, Magik Johnsun (or Jonsun), or Peter O'Tool, whose phonetic similarity to the names of famous stars is clearly intended.

<sup>9</sup> See Hohenberger 1998, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> See Volker Wortmann. “Was wissen Bilder schon über die Welt, die sie bedeuten sollen? Sieben Anmerkungen zur Ikonographie des Authentischen,” in: Knaller, Müller 2006, p. 183.

Despite this early break in its contract with the viewer, the film continues to follow the conventions of a documentary: there is a continuous alternation between “historical” footage and photos in black and white against more recent color footage of the former band members who in turn comment on past events from their respective points of view.

Soon the documentary images and films covering the career of The Dix become more and more porous in regard to their authenticity. No matter that historical chart lists are shown, where the band takes the top spot, as well as covers of their successful releases. At the very latest during a triumphal television appearance of the band it becomes obvious to the viewer that the images involve montage, since the oversized heads of The Dix have been mounted on the bodies of The Beatles. So, while there is plenty of authentic historic material on display, from the record covers to the screaming girls in the audience, it originally had nothing to do with the supposed Dix.<sup>11</sup> Their television performance clarifies that the band never existed, that their whole history is the result of montage. The montage is not hidden at all—it would have been easy, especially with digital means, to find more fitting dimensions for the heads—on the contrary, rendering the fault lines visible achieves a calculated comic effect. Just as obviously, during their scenes as talking heads the former band members wear latex masks to suggest aging, which in the course of the filming become soft and whitish.

A scene that features the re-enactment of an event in the career of The Dix, or more precisely their downfall, offers a perfect example for the film’s ironic references to the stagedness of documentaries. It gives an account of a member leaving the group, which is first explained with his death. Although at that point it has become clear that the film is a fake documentary, this “re-enactment” within a fictitious story is ironically labeled as such on the screen. In due course, however, it becomes clear that the version of the story on which the re-enactment had been based was actually mistaken, a memory lapse caused by too many drugs. So, the wrong version of the event, death, is replaced by the correct one, a solo career. In this way, the scene addresses central issues and problems of documentary film, such as re-enactments illustrating events for the camera and the questionable objectivity of a point of view, of the authenticity of that which is shown.

The seriousness and drama of the film’s beginning in the end dissolves in laughter, more precisely the laughter of one of the musicians who is kneaded with butter by a masseuse. She also starts laughing, seemingly more at the strangeness of the scene she is involved in, and less as part of the fictional narrative. So, the last scene contains another clue to the film’s stagedness. And the film’s closing credits contain a final pointer toward fictionality, since the names of everybody involved follow the same pattern as the names of the band members in

<sup>11</sup> A similar kind of play with historical or historicizing film footage is performed by Outkast in their video *Hey Ya!* (2003). It shows the fictional band The Love Below (all of whose members are in fact impersonated by Outkast’s André 3000) in a television performance of the 1960s, although in this instance neither the images of the band nor their screaming female fans are original material from the time. That the performance is supposed to take place in the past becomes clear mostly through the TV presenter and the black-and-white television set shown on screen. Costumes and stage design are all historicizing, but since the detail is never very true to period, they oscillate between the past and the time of the video’s production, which reveals the “fake.”

that they phonetically resemble famous stars. The play around documentation and fiction in the end becomes a play around the identity of the film's creators, which is further riddled rather than cleared up during the closing credits.<sup>12</sup>

The film's extras, which add an audio-commentary to the story of *The Dix*, offer further references to its creators. In this commentary, the actors talk about the film during the seemingly authentic situation of watching it for the first time and reacting spontaneously. Its status still remains unclear: is it really a recording made while the actors first watched the film, or is the commentary also part of the fictional level? The play between documentation and fake documentation is in no way decided by the audio comments but rather taken to another level.

4.

Both in the filmic productions of Kourtrajmé and in *The Dix*, documentary elements are first established through different technical and aesthetic strategies. Later these elements are—mostly ironically—revealed as fiction, while some keep on having an unclear or unclarifiable status. The play between reality and fiction, the staging of audiovisual authenticity and its ironic subversion are closely tied to the music. While Kourtrajmé question the codes of hip-hop by overacting them, in *The Dix* the codes of stardom and of the downfall of stars are ironized by proxy. On a musical level, *The Dix* also refers to funk, the ancestor of hip-hop. Similar to *The Funk Hunt* by Kourtrajmé, the producers prove their historical consciousness by invoking the proper tradition. The music itself, though, is not treated with irony at all, just as DJ Mehdi's music in *Mégalopolis* isn't. In fact, the value of DJ Mehdi's music is even enhanced by the play around the rappers' identities, since it proves that his remix was not merely made for commercial purposes. Playing with visual, social, and musical codes on the one hand establishes full control over them, while the ironic treatment on the other hand allows for a meta-approach. Credibility at first seems to dissolve in laughter, in a play around "fake" and "real." But in the end the "fake" produced here, as it treats these codes with self-reflexive virtuosity, proves to be highly "true to the game," and the music and its creators, as well as the producers of the films, gain a new level of cognitive credibility.

▷

Translation: Lutz Eitel

<sup>12</sup> A trustworthy pointer to the true creators from the circle of Prince Paul can be found only on the backside of the DVD/CD cover, which contains the credits "Produced by Orgynius and Prince Paul" and "Art direction by Prince Paul & A. Vee."

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2005.

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