Review

Laura Niebling, *Rockumentary: Theorie, Geschichte und Industrie*. Marburg: Schueren Verlag, 2018. 412 pp. ISBN 978-3-89472-842-7 (pbk).

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Laura Niebling's *Rockumentary: Theorie, Geschichte und Industrie* offers a comprehensive (German language) overview of the history and industrial context of the rockumentary. It is one of the few book-length studies of the phenomenon, alongside, for example, the edited collection *The Music Documentary* (Halligan et al. 2013). *Rockumentary* aims to chart the format's development from inception to its most recent incarnations.

In Chapter 1, Niebling briefly sketches out the theoretical framework of this study, and situates the work within critical media industry studies, contract theory, and popular culture studies. Niebling argues that the rockumentary 'exists as a marginalized advertising instrument'¹ (p. 8), with its documentary aspects neglected in its reception. It is initially unclear whether the author agrees with this judgement and if this book, perhaps, aims to present a more well-rounded account of the music documentary, one that acknowledges all its forms and functions. Over the next six chapters, however, this book does offer a more nuanced approach by exploring the rockumentary's history, aesthetics and industrial context. The main research questions that Niebling aims to answer are: 'What are the characteristics of the mass media phenomenon rockumentary? How has the rockumentary developed over time? And what is its economic context?' (p. 9). She does so by drawing on a range of rockumentaries from the last sixty years (a list and justification for inclusion in the appendix would have further supported the arguments made), supplementary media materials, and a small number of interviews with industry insiders.

Beginning to build on this material, Chapter 2 aims to offer a blueprint for a rockumentary definition and further situates the rockumentary in the context of

1. All quotations in this review are translations. All translations are my own.

music journalism, radio history and film history. Niebling locates the rockumentary's origins in radio documentaries and the rock documentaries of the 1960s, which shaped the dualistic approach to its subject: both participatory and critical in its commentary. The author notes that this approach was not always well-received in the early critical reception of the genre: the rockumentary's close relationship with the music industry was seen as evident of a lack of artistic authenticity.

Further contextualizing the rockumentary, Chapter 3 considers the medium within other film genres concerned with or shaped by music, for example the musical or the music feature film. By far the longest chapter, it serves not only to contextualize the study, but also to craft a 'theory of music film'. The rockumentary emerges as one of four categories within the music film genre amongst the music documentary, the music feature film, and the experimental music art film. It is therefore placed within a category that is distinct from the music documentary due to its close relationship with the music industry, and its more commercial orientation more broadly: 'The rockumentary describes the mode of documentary genres representing music which exists in economic dependency of and working with the music industry' (p. 79). This approach shapes the subsequent analysis, and explains the arguably under-researched foregrounding of industrial context and demands. This also means, however, that approaches that acknowledge artistic creativity or explore audiences and their interactions with the medium are perhaps neglected when they could have enriched the analysis further.

Chapter 4 charts the history of the rockumentary from the 1960s to the twenty-first century, and is broken into three eras. The first, the Direct Cinema era (1960–1980), expands on the arguments made earlier regarding the rockumentary's origins. The rise of the rockumentary is contextualized within the emergence of youth culture as a new consumer market and as audiences for tour documentaries such as *What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA* (1964). As such, the rockumentary also functions as a witness to the pop culture of the 1960s: festival and concert films such as *Woodstock* (1970) capture the spirit of the time and monumental moments in popular culture history.

The section on the MTV era (1980s–2000) provides an insight into the medium's production and consumption in relation to music television. Aesthetic connections between music video and rockumentary emerged in the MTV era. Niebling highlights that visual markers such as fast cuts, close-ups and shaky camera movements have been by previous scholars assigned to the influence of the music video, techniques which found their way into the rockumentary. However, within this chapter, Niebling argues that the true relationship was the inverse. The migration of MTV directors to Hollywood had an impact on cinema aesthetics, not only through the music video, but 'especially' (p. 223) through the rockumentary. The

impact of music videos on (digital) cinema is well-documented, for example in Carol Vernallis's *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (2013). However, following this initial claim, it is not clear how the rockumentary impact is chartered here. Some analysis of one or two examples that trace the journey of rockumentary elements into Hollywood films would have illuminated this argument. This moment is emblematic of the writing style of this book. The author herself argues that further research is needed in this area, and this would indeed have made for an interesting focus. The broad overview that the book aims to offer also creates its greatest frustration as the author often gestures towards fascinating arguments and areas of study, but does not explore these in any depth. This is, however, due to the nature of the work.

The final era discussed (2000–present) is concerned with the impact of digital technology on production, consumption and aesthetics. The pivot away from physical formats towards digital downloads and streaming sets the scene for this section. Here, Niebling argues that the rockumentary can perhaps be understood as a melodrama, where we now see a shift from myths of creativity towards showcasing hard work as a reaction to digital cultures that demand a more intimate relationship with the star. Again, the argument deserves further exploration as it engages more with the creative strategies employed within the specific industrial context.

The industry and industrial context of the rockumentary are considered in Chapter 5. This section chronicles the rockumentary's production from inception over negotiations with production companies to its release. The main focus is on music labels as producers on the one hand, and film production companies on the other, and the difference between major and independent labels in the production of the rockumentary. Niebling highlights that beyond the obvious greater resources available to major labels, independents are also different in their approach to the medium. Contrary to the image of independent labels as more interested in art than commerce, independents often consider the rockumentary as a form of advertising for more traditional album releases, rather than pieces of art in their own right. The chapter considers the impact of digital technologies such as VR on the production process and future of the rockumentary, but is cautious of its creative potential. Due to the rockumentary's main aim to be an 'accessible and thus commercial form of entertainment' (p. 279), experimental formats are not prioritized. Niebling dedicates plenty of space to an under-researched aspect of the rockumentary: its distribution. Film festivals continue to play a big role in its promotion and distribution. Further importance is given to the television market, both in its linear and streaming incarnations, which continues to be the rockumentary's biggest market. While the author acknowledges that the data set is rather small, there

is an unresolved tension between the reliance on a very small number of insider interviews and the sometimes near-universal claims made in the book about the nature of the rockumentary.

Concluding the study, Chapter 6 considers the cultural impact of the rockumentary, arguing that it is a historical witness to developments in popular music in the twentieth and twenty-first century. This argument perhaps neglects the rockumentary's own role in constructions of history in popular culture (see Long and Wall 2010). However, this conclusion is perhaps shaped by Niebling's assertion that the rockumentary is a mode of representation rather than documentation, as it is located between 'the critical perspective of the documentary and the entertaining perspective of the music feature film' (pp. 342–43). The final section identifies further areas for research, and highlights especially the need for further research into the political economy of the rockumentary. It is here that the book makes perhaps its strongest intervention: it makes visible the economic structures that shape the making of the rockumentary.

The most glaringly obvious limitation of this book is the absence of any discussions concerning race and gender. This is even highlighted by the author who, in passing, cites 'one of the few women in the music video business' (p. 201). While the representation of women in music documentaries has been discussed previously (see, for example, Polaschek 2017), the lack of literature on women as makers of rockumentaries means that the book could have made a strong and important intervention here. In summary, *Rockumentary's* biggest strength is its tracing of the genre over several decades, and the exploration of its industrial context. As such, it would be of interest to scholars in popular music studies, media studies and film studies who are interested in a broad overview of music-related film genres.

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