Documenting the Documentary

Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video

NEW AND EXPANDED EDITION

With a Foreword by Bill Nichols

Edited by Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski

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Chapter 20

Gender, Power, and a Cucumber

Satirizing Masculinity in This Is Spinal Tap

Carl Plantinga

As a military term in the nineteenth century, “heavy metal” signified “large guns, carrying balls of a large size” (Walser 1); today “heavy metal” refers to a kind of rock music practiced by bands such as Metallica, Black Sabbath, and Motley Crüe. The two meanings are not unrelated, as the satiric This Is Spinal Tap (1984) implies. During a concert tour of North America, a member of the fictional band Spinal Tap has trouble clearing an airport security checkpoint. With each pass through the metal detector, bass player Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer) trips the alarm. After several unsuccessful attempts, and having now become the object of many stares, Derek sheepishly reaches into his spandex tights and removes the item that tripped the alarm—an oversized cucumber wrapped in aluminum foil.

This moment succinctly embodies a chief satiric target of This Is Spinal Tap—the hypermasculinity of Spinal Tap and heavy metal culture, taking its most exaggerated form in Derek’s phallic cucumber. Spinal Tap’s masculinity is expressed through flashy displays of technical virtuosity, a choreography of sexual display and male bonding, the “power chords” of the music itself, and phallic guitars and microphones. The band promotes what one (fictional) reviewer calls a “retarded” sexuality stripped of all romanticism or spirituality. Moreover, it is significant that the security guards at the airport checkpoint are women. Heavy metal’s emphasis on male power is sometimes manifested in celebrations of the domination of females and defines femininity as passive and erotically available. That it is
two remonstrants who force Derek to publicly reveal his pretensions thus doubles the embarrassment.

The promotion of stereotypical gender roles is the province not merely of heavy metal but of rock music generally. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie claim that rock music solidifies gender stereotypes and that hard rock, or what they call “rock rock,” is a “male form” (174). “Both in its presentation and in its use,” they write, “rock has confirmed traditional definitions of what constitutes masculinity and femininity” (387). The music video has also been scrutinized for its gender implications (Kaplan, Lewis). Lisa Lewis argues that rock videos draw on ideologies of adolescence and masculinity, creating a “male preferred address” that supports a “social system of male privilege” (155). In this regard, heavy metal is not qualitatively different than mainstream rock music; it is simply more extreme.

Heavy metal has diverse critics, ranging from the religious right to Tipper Gore to rock critics on the progressive left. Yet even sympathetic commentators describe heavy metal as a discourse of power and masculinity that defines masculinity in traditional terms as the binary opposite of femininity (Weinstein 162–5; Walser 168–69). The audience for heavy metal, as Deena Weinstein notes, “is more than just male; it is masculinist” (164). Recent developments in heavy metal culture include “lite” or “glam” metal (with bands such as Poison and Bon Jovi), forms that attract more female audiences. At the time of This Is Spinal Tap’s 1984 release, however, heavy metal culture was, when not overtly misogynist, unwelcoming to females, excluding women from the ranks of equals, and emphasizing male bonding. Yet like Derek’s cucumber, heavy metal’s image of masculinity is a fabrication and an exaggeration. And like the security guards at the airport, This Is Spinal Tap displays the pretensions of this hypermasculinist discourse for all to see.

This Is Spinal Tap was director Rob Reiner’s first feature film, though previous experience included his role as Meathead on television’s All in the Family (1971–79). Spinal Tap, the band, consists of Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) on lead guitar, David St. Hubbins (Michael McKean) as lead vocalist, Derek Smalls (Shearer) on bass, Viv Savage (David Kaff) on keyboards, and Mick Shrimpton (R. S. Parnell) on drums. Reiner, Guest, McKean, and Shearer share the writing credits, and the latter three wrote and performed all the music. Guest had long been toying with the character of grimacing lead guitarist Nigel, and in 1979, he, McKean, and Shearer appeared on a television show spoofing “Midnight Special,” with Reiner playing Wolfman Jack. Out of this experience grew Spinal Tap. Later, on the strength of a twenty-minute demonstration reel, Auroa Embassy agreed to finance the feature film, which eventually cost $2.2 million to produce.

This Is Spinal Tap: The problem with pretensions in public.

This Is Spinal Tap played with the notion that this version of masculinity was “sophisticated” (quoted in Harnett 30). Reiner notes that his previews of Spinal Tap were less successful: “A small section of the audience heard of” (quoted in Harnett 30). Spinal Tap’s appearance on Saturday Night Live was a music video, and with their new album, Break Like . . . Clearly an appreciation for the film as a “serious documentary” about a pseudo-documentary, a fiction film parodying the forms of drug writing, and filmmaking—Reiner’s understanding of its place in rock documentalism—The Last Walt
This Is Spinal Tap played well in the large urban markets generally thought to be “sophisticated”—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto. Reiner notes that his previews of the film in a Dallas shopping mall proved less successful: “A small section of the audience laughed. The rest asked why we would make a serious documentary about a terrible band they had never heard of” (quoted in Harmetz 20). But the film’s overall success resulted in Spinal Tap’s appearance on Saturday Night Live (1975–present), commercial album sales, a music video, and a tour. The group even re-formed in 1992, with their new album, Break Like the Wind.

Clearly an appreciation for This Is Spinal Tap depends on taking it not as a “serious documentary” about an obscure and untalented band but as a pseudo-documentary, a fiction film which, like Zelig (1983) and Bob Roberts (1992), parodies the forms of documentary. An appreciation of the acting, writing, and filmmaking—the art of the film—depends on our reflexive understanding of its parody and satire, as I discuss below. This Is Spinal Tap mimics rock documentaries such as Woodstock (1970), Gimme Shelter (1970), and The Last Waltz (1978). Reiner contracted documentary
producer Karen Murphy to give the film a surface authenticity and hired cinematographer Peter Smokler, who had worked on Gimme Shelter, as director of photography. This Is Spinal Tap was largely improvised during production; the group improvised scenes around a loose outline, giving the film a stronger documentary feel than the tightly controlled films of mainstream Hollywood.

I have referred to This Is Spinal Tap as a satire of the heavy metal discourse on masculinity and a parody of rock documentaries. The terms "satire" and "parody" are often used as synonyms but have slightly different meanings. Both involve the imitation of and ironic commentary on another discourse. Yet satire implies ridicule of its target, while a parody need not deride its object but may range from an ethos of condemnation to one of homage and celebration (cf. Hitchens 10–11).

This Is Spinal Tap parodies the rock documentary in part through an imitation of its methods. The film employs familiar cinema verite techniques in its "coverage" of Spinal Tap's tour—handheld cameras, zooms, and reverse zooms, rack and follow focusing, and swish pans. In this case, however, all scenes consist of actors performing loosely scripted actions. The film also depends heavily on the filmed interview. This Is Spinal Tap successfully imitates this documentary technique, staging individual and group interviews that appear throughout the film. Unlike the documentary, however, both interviewer and interviewee play the scripted roles of fictional characters. The structure of the film alternates between "cinema verite" scenes that follow the band on tour and the interviews that provide biographical and historical "information." The film also parodies rock documentary by making oblique references to earlier such films. For example, Reiner appears in the film's exposition to introduce himself as filmmaker Marti Di Bergi, a reference to Martin Scorcese, director of The Last Waltz, a documentary about the farewell concert of The Band. (Like The Band in The Last Waltz, Spinal Tap is portrayed as a veteran group, having been formed around 1973 and having made fifteen albums.)

Although This Is Spinal Tap parodies the rock documentary, it reserves its satire and ridicule for Spinal Tap and its hypermasculinity. Both parody and satire depend on the sophistication of the viewer and on some familiarity with the satiric or parodic target. This Is Spinal Tap tempts us to approach it as a "serious" documentary but introduces comic markers—typically ironic incongruities or exaggerations—to disrupt our "serious" viewing habits (Hitchens 49). Irony is essential to both parody and satire and is the "main rhetorical mechanism" for expressing textual interpretations and evaluations (Hutcheson 30). Comedy presents frames for the sake of laughter, as when various characters continually remix the band's name.
The limousine driver meets Spinal Tap at the airport with a cardboard sign reading “Spinal Tap” and, later, Lt. Bill Hogstraat refers to the band as “Spinal Tarp.” Satire typically has a more critical bent, often with a social or political point. The band’s stage antics and relationships with women, a point to which I shall return later, are satirical. In this way This Is Spinal Tap represents heavy metal music and culture, exaggerates it or highlights incongruities, and critiques it through satire.

Central to heavy metal culture is the concert performance—an expression of power, intensity, energy, freedom, and virtuosity. In a context in which power is construed as essentially male, the heavy metal performer marshals every technique possible to express potency and power—through music, costume, staging, choreography, and displays of skill with voice and instrument. The music features a heavy beat with a deep bass “bottom rhythm,” together with power chords and distorted voices, both produced literally by excessive power, as the performers intentionally exceed the capacities of guitar amplifiers and vocal chords. One of the running gags of This Is Spinal Tap—the bizarre deaths of the band’s drummers, both past and present—plays on this emphasis on manic energy. Like some actual rock drummers (Keith Moon of The Who comes to mind), those in Spinal Tap live crazed, intense lives and meet premature ends. The first drummer, Stuffy Peeps, died in a freak gardening accident, while the next, Stumpy Joe, expired while choking on someone else’s vomit. As Derek remarks, “They can’t prove whose vomit it was.” Mick Shrimpton survives until close to film’s end when during a manic performance he spontaneously combusts, a victim of ever-increasing levels of intensity and distorted sound.

Much of the visual humor of the film occurs during the tour and performances. Heavy metal, Walser writes, “often stages fantasies of masculine virtuosity and control” (108), in which “spectacular gladiators compete to register and affect ideas of masculinity, sexuality, and gender relations” (111). Spinal Tap’s pathetic reality contrasts with these delusions of mastery and grandiosity. Coverage of the tour begins with an optimistic, energetic montage as Spinal Tap arrives in New York, with the requisite shots of the band members moving purposefully through the airport, roadies unloading equipment, excited fans wildly cheering in a packed concert hall, and the band itself in the film’s first concert footage. However, the tour soon leads Spinal Tap on a downward spiral of failure and humiliation. And though the concert performances are designed to convey grandeur, power, and virtuosic skill, various mishaps create an opposite sense. One of the film’s best visual gags occurs at “Shank Hall” in Milwaukee, where during the performance the band is supposed to emerge, in a choreographed “birth,” from three egglike pods. Unfortunately Derek’s pod malfunctions and does not
open, and while he tries to retain his composure, a roadie hacks at the pod with a hammer and then burns it with a blowtorch. Finally it opens and the relieved Derek bursts free, but at just the wrong moment—immediately after David and Nigel have returned to their pods for the end of the number. What is intended as a skilled display of choreographed movement turns into travesty and farce.

In Chicago, the band checks into the Holiday Inn, where on the familiar company sign we read “Welcome National Company of the Wiz and Spinal Tap,” a juxtaposition that belies the grandiose image Spinal Tap strives to create. Promo man Artie Fufkin (Paul Shaffer) has set up an autograph session at a Chicago record store, but as the band sits glumly, dressed as “metal gods” to receive the adulation of their fans, no customers show up. Cleveland finds the band wandering in mazelike passageways beneath the stage, unable to find its way to the waiting audience. A band that cannot find the stage hardly conveys skill and power. Heavy metal bands often turn to images and themes of the occult or of Satan that supposedly carry implications of mystery and power. The occult theme backfires for Spinal Tap, however. The Stonehenge debacle, during which, after a breakdown in communication, a diminutive 18-inch (rather than 18-foot) Stonehenge...
sculpture descends from the rafters and is almost trampled by two dancing
dwarves, leads to audience peals of laughter and to the departure of man-
ger Ian Faith (Tony Hedra). But more important, it serves again to contrast
pretensions of grandeur with actuality.

David’s partner, Jeanine Pettibone (June Chadwick), takes over as
manager, but she is unable to reverse the band’s downward trend. In Se-
attle, their regular gig is canceled so they find themselves playing for the
“monthly at ease weekend” at Lindbergh Air Force Base, where the audi-
ence expects easy-listening music. (Black Sabbath—then called “Earth”—
once found itself in a similar predicament: a booking mistake found them
at a party where the audience expected waltzes (Weinstein 32–33). At the
base Lt. Bob Hogstraat allows the band thirty minutes to set up so they can
“get it over with.” After transmissions from a control tower interfere with
the guitars, Nigel, who decides he has had enough, walks offstage, and
quits the band. Near the bottom of Spinal Tap’s steady downward trajectory, the band appears at Themeland Amusement Park, where the billboard
reads “Puppet Show and Spinal Tap.” Jeanine tries to put an optimistic face
on events, noting that at least they’ve got a large dressing room. David sar-
castically replies, “Oh, we’ve got a bigger dressing room than the puppets!”
In all of these cases, the satire foregrounds the incongruity between the
music and its presentation, which are intended to signify extreme vitality
and power, and the pathetic situations in which the band finds itself.

Heavy metal performance celebrates maleness specifically through
sexual and virtuosic display. Performance in what Frith and McRobbie call
“cock rock” “is an explicit, crude, and often aggressive expression of male
sexuality” (174). For example, Van Halen lead singer David Lee Roth some-
times performed while wearing tight leather pants with the cloth around
the buttocks cut out. On the cover of the band’s first album, Van Halen
(1978), Roth appears with a naked chest and a microphone jutting from
his crotch. His running, jumping, and gymnastic moves onstage all were
meant to signify physical prowess and sexual vitality. Such individualistic
display is often allowed only to the lead singer and lead guitarist, although
the drummer sometimes gets his solo as well.

It is thus fitting that Derek, the bass player, is the quiet man of Spinal
Tap, content to allow David and Nigel center stage. With his measured
demeanor, thick beard, and meerschaum pipe, he initially seems older and
wiser than Nigel and David, carrying an air of dignity and intelligence.
All such pretensions disappear when he speaks, however. During one in-
terview he calls Nigel and David the visionaries of the band, rather like
English poets Shelley and Byron. (The band regularly equates itself with
canonized writers and composers.) If Nigel and David are like fire and ice,
Derek says, he stands somewhere in between, like "lukewarm water." Lead singer David St. Hubbins, who says he is named after "the patron saint of quality footwear," is the group's intellectual "force" (such as it is) and the "straight man" of the group. The lead singer of a heavy metal band often "fronts" the group, acting as spokesperson in interviews. So David is more articulate than Derek and Nigel, with fewer comic quirks and eccentricities. He is the only band member who apparently remains separate from the group's popularizing the film and is the only member to have a steady partner. (At the Recording Industry Convention, however, Derek, Nigel, and David have prominent herpes sores on their lips.) David's chief function is to serve as leader and stabilizing figure, until his weaknesses allow Jeanine's "female intrusions" into the male enclave and result in the film's chief dramatic conflict.

Through Nigel, Spinal Tap's lead guitarist and the film's lead player, the film most pointedly satirizes the hypermasculine theater of heavy metal performers—especially guitarists. Onstage, Nigel's strutting gyrations, facial contortions, and tongue-wagging exaggerate what every wannabe rocker recognizes as the conventions of heavy metal's "cult of the lead guitarist." The performances of Nigel and the band reduce sexual relations to animal drives and strutting sexual display. While the music keeps time to a throbbing, erotic rhythm, the lyrics to songs such as "Sex Farm" and "Big Bottom" ("I just can't leave her behind") equate sexuality with expressions of aggression and lust. Moreover, the stage show becomes a display of erotic gymnastics. Spandex was introduced to heavy metal around 1980. As Weinstein notes, "Pants made of this material allow greater freedom of movement onstage and better display of the athletic bodies of the performers, thereby promoting an image of vital power" (39). Moreover, for Spinal Tap, the skin-tight Spandex outfits feed their obsession with penis size (also echoed by Derek's airport incident). Nigel imagines that the band's impressive bodies and bulging genitalia cause "terror" in many of their fans. His guitar-playing epitomizes the band's sexual display; his instrument metaphorically becomes a giant phallicus, as he holds it against his crotch and swings it toward the crowd, while grimacing and suggestively wagging his tongue. In short, the art this band practices is a none-too-subtle celebration of animal masculinity.

Heavy metal emphasizes the guitar solo as much as any subgenre of rock; nearly every heavy metal song features at least one such solo, and few other instruments are allowed solos. The guitar solo is a primary means through which the heavy metal performer expresses virtuosity; it is a forum for the display not only of musical skill and technical wizardry but of a more diffuse masculine quality. As Waller writes, "Virtuosity—ultimately derived from the Latin root virtus—demonstrates and enacts a p: might be called "potency." (56).

In This Is Spinal Tap, all disp become ironic: implications of its is clear from a dismal guitar solo—repeated high notes, he grates his guitar strings, creating a deafening sound over the sublimity of bliss, it seems—to the stage floor out disturbing his performance, in contrast to the guitar skills of Eddie Van Halen, Randy Rhoads, contention that just anyone could.

Nigel's pretensions and fan stardom—become one of the film at Vanderbilt Auditorium in be named the miniature bread (whi are full-size) and at the fact that their little red pimentos, later N music with Di Bergi. As he plunks of B-minor, which "makes people Mozart and Bach," he says, in and musical genius with theirs, he calls "Lick My Love Pump," only suggests the heavy metal gut to Ringo's joke in a Hard Day's... whether he's a mod or a rocke.

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derived from the Latin root vir [man]—has always been concerned with
demonstrating and enacting a particular kind of power and freedom that
might be called 'potency'” (76). Thus Eddie Van Halen's extended guitar
solo on Van Halen is called "Eruption," a metaphor for male ejaculation.

In This Is Spinal Tap, all displays of what the band considers virtuosity
become ironic implications of its lack. Nigel has meager talents at best, as
is clear from a dismal guitar solo during which, after the requisite riff of
repeated high notes, he grates his tennis shoe and then a violin against the
guitar strings, creating a deafening cacophony. During another solo, he is
so overcome by the sublimity of his playing that he descends—in orgasmic
bliss, it seems—to the stage floor, where a roadie tries to pick him up with-
out disturbing his performance. (The mediocrity of Nigel's playing stands
in contrast to the guitar skills of the best actual metal guitarists—e.g.,
Eddie Van Halen, Randy Rhoads—whose obvious technical skill belies the
contention that just anyone could play heavy metal guitar.)

Nigel's pretensions and fastidious nature—both privileges of rock
stardom—become one of the film's motifs. Spoiled fussiness is apparent
at Vandermint Auditorium in North Carolina, where Nigel becomes infuri-
ated at the miniature bread (which confuses him because the meat slices
are full-size) and at the fact that some of the Spanish olives are missing
their little red pimentos. Later Nigel plays piano and ruminates about his
music with Di Bergi. As he plinks on the keyboard, Nigel speaks of the key
of B-minor, which "makes people weep instantly." "I'm really influenced
by Mozart and Bach," he says, in a transparent attempt to link his virtuosity
and musical genius with theirs. The tune he plays, "a Mach piece really,"
he calls "Lick My Love Pump." The neologism he creates—"Mach"—not
only suggests the heavy metal guitarist's emphasis on speed but also refers
to Ringo's joke in A Hard Day's Night (1964), where after a question about
whether he's a mod or a rocker, he answers that he's a "mocker."

Another memorable scene has Nigel walking Di Bergi through the
room that houses Nigel's collection of electric guitars. One might expect
a skilled guitarist, as a requirement of virtuosity, to have expert knowledge
of his instrument. Unlike Eddie Van Halen, who constructed some of his
 guitars himself, Nigel seems to know little about the instruments. At each
guitar or piece of equipment, Nigel displays either capriciousness or
ignorance. As they stop at the first guitar, Nigel asks Di Bergi to listen to
the "sustain." When Di Bergi protests that he doesn't hear anything, Nigel
thinks for a moment, then replies, "You would if it were playing." Nigel has
difficulty describing a guitar with special equipment allowing him to freely
roam the stage, and Di Bergi tells the uninformed collector that it's called a
"wireless." An heroic fantasy requires sacred idols, and for Nigel this is his
"original" guitar, which has never been played. Nigel lets Di Bergi inspect it, but not to touch it, then not to point at it. Di Bergi, so he can look at it. Loudness contributes to a ethos of power and intensity, and This Is Spinal Tap pokes fun at the mentality that valorizes sheer volume. As Nigel and Di Bergi move on to an amplifier with volume controls that reach "11" rather than "10," Nigel impresses on Di Bergi the importance of being able to play one notch louder. Di Bergi tries to explain that you can't play one notch louder, that the volume control doesn't guarantee a louder amplifier.

Heavy metal's theater of hypermasculinity doesn't simply relate to metal; it has implications for women as well. Weinstein notes that "Women are aliens in the heavy metal subculture because of their otherwise" and that heavy metal culture is "an enormous male bonding group" (135). Walser describes what he calls the "exclusion," or exclusion, of women from heavy metal culture and its misogyny. Heavy metal, he writes, is "a world of action, excess, transgression, . . . one in which men are the only actors, and in which male bonding among members of the 'hero team' is the only important social relationship" (144-145). Women are also seen as a threat because their attractiveness threatens to disrupt both male self-control and the collective strength of male bonding (Walser 148). This in turn accounts for the misogynistic lyrics of bands such as W.A.S.P., Guns N' Roses, and Motley Crue and the prevalence of the femme fatale figure in the songs of Dokken and Whitesnake, for example.

Essential to the theme of misogyny and exclusion, as developed in This Is Spinal Tap, is the arrival of Jeannine Pettibone. After the Memphis show is canceled, David is heartened because Jeannine has announced that she is coming from England to accompany David and the band. Other than Jeannine and the relatively positive character of Bobbi Fishman (Fran Drescher), who articulately castigates Ian for the band's sexist album cover, the women who populate This Is Spinal Tap are groupies whose main function is to adore the band members and reinforce their masculine identities. Jeannine hearkens to media caricatures of well-known rock 'n' roll wives such as Yoko Ono and Linda McCartney. She represents a threat to Spinal Tap's unity, not only because she is a female who demands power in this boys' club but because she is secretive, scheming, and utterly humorless. She eventually usurps Ian's role as manager and controls David, and thus the band. The film takes care to emphasize the lifelong friendship of Nigel and David with pictures of their boyhood life in "Squirm" to set up Jeannine in the eyes of Nigel as an intruder in this world of "legitimate" male relationships.

Jeannine is controlling and a little dotty, charting the band's travel plans according to horoscopes. Her hold on David, and through him by inference on the band, is considerable. She finally breaks out her book of the band and screams that she is David's star. She even demands that he "treat her right," just as David's father teaches him to treat women. She takes David to the Southern Tier Ham Festival, where Di Bergi shows David how to play the guitar. She even goes with the other band members to a gentlemen's club where the other band members become influenced by David. "She gives me the edge of the band," he philosophizes. Despite her obvious attraction to David, Jeannine's influence is obvious in their recording session. Nigel figures has been distracted, musically and mentally, by the band for men.

As Jeannine assumes greater and greater control, it becomes increasingly apparent that their latest album "sounds" rather than "feels." She uses her ideas for the songs for the album. While Nigel is to wear a Cape, Jeannine makes sure the scorpion face does not have a hair on it. Nigel quickly scrawls a sketch on a napkin and presents it.

The conflict comes to David and Jeannine suggest that they see this as a decision point, as he notes, is "the inarticulate power, and after the kind of power over which I can't control. The more you are in control, the less you control. We are at the end of the road. The best thing we can do is to-"
on the band, is significant. David needs the “direction” she gives, saying that she “sorted out his life for him.” On the telephone before she arrives, she tells David she can determine by his voice that he’s been eating too much sugar. Jeanine becomes a kind of nuclear threat to the male culture of *This Is Spinal Tap*. She monopolizes and influences David and associates little with other band members. In the band’s bus, David and Jeanine sit in front, and Jeanine refuses David’s mumbling requests for permission to join the other band members at the rear. During an interview David says that Jeanine influences the band’s music through the criticisms she reveals only to David: “She gives me the brutally frank version and I sort of tart it up for [the rest of the band].” She sometimes whispers into David’s ear, and he obediently acts. Despite David’s claim that Jeanine and Nigel love each other (though admittedly their “communication is blocked”), their mutual antipathy is obvious in their competition for David’s attentions. During a recording session, Nigel loudly criticizes David’s playing, saying that Jeanine has been distracting him. The real issue is that Jeanine violates the masculine code of the band because she usurps the power usually reserved for men.

As Jeanine assumes greater control, both Nigel and Ian (the manager) become increasingly alienated. During a restaurant meeting, Jeanine suggests that their latest album has been mixed poorly, but her references to “Dobby” (rather than “Dolby”) give Nigel cause to make fun of her. She then unveils her ideas for a new production design for the band, featuring masks for the three band leaders that not-too-subtly reveal her sympathies. While Nigel is to wear a Capricorn mask that resembles a devilish goat and Derek a scorpion-face derived from Scorpio, David’s Leo mask would be a handsome lion. Nigel quickly rejects Jeanine’s plans and hastily draws the Stonehenge sketch on a napkin, which becomes the ill-fated idea for their newest prop.

The conflict comes to a head after the Stonehenge concert, when David and Jeanine suggest that Ian share managing duties with Jeanine. Ian sees this as a demotion and an insult, especially since his would-be partner, as he notes, is “a woman.” Lugging his cricket bat as a totem of phallic power, and after the requisite round of insults (cruelty is the surest sign of power over others), he quits the band and storms out. Later Nigel walks off the stage mid-concert at Lindbergh Air Force Base when his electric guitar picks up control tower transmissions. Of his departed partner, David later says, “We shan’t work together again.” At their lowest point, the short-handed band plays freeform “jazz” to a jeering audience at Theme-land Amusement Park. Having successfully replaced both Ian and Nigel, Jeanine joins the band onstage with a tambourine, her presence breaking
the unwritten rule that the heavy metal stage be a site of masculine theater
and male bonding.

Neither the band members nor their manager accepts women as
equals; for them women are either compliant sex kittens or monstrous
manipulators. The band’s sexism is “retarded,” or juvenile, because it is
completely unselfconscious. The album cover for their release, Smell the
Glove, alludes to the ties between heavy metal and sadomasochism, and fea-
tures a greased, naked woman on all fours, wearing a dog collar and leash,
supine before a black glove, pushed to her face. When Bobbi Fleckman de-
nounces the cover to Ian, he tells her she “should have seen the cover they
wanted to do. It wasn’t a glove, believe me.” When the band is told that the
album will not be released due to its sexist cover, Nigel naively asks, “What’s
wrong with being sexy?” Ian is a well-drawn character, and an important
means by which the film satirizes a masculinity that can barely control ag-
gression. Ian percolates with the threat of both verbal and physical violence
(hes carries the phallic cricket bat with him wherever he goes). Weinstein
notes that heavy metal culture is homophobic, tending toward “an attitude
of extreme intolerance toward male homosexuality” (106). Although this
aspect of heavy metal culture is mostly ignored in This Is Spinal Tap, it is
apparent in the insults Ian hurls at other adult men, featuring derogatory
terms for homosexuals. Sir Denis Eton-Hogg (Patrick MacNee) is the over-
stuffed president of Polymer Records (the pun on “Polydor” denoting the
plastic or ersatz nature of his enterprise). When Sir Denis cancels plans for
the album cover, Ian covers the telephone mouthpiece and mutters, “fuck-
ing old poofers.” Later Ian abuses a thickly lensed hotel clerk, calling him a
“twisted old fruit.”

Although This Is Spinal Tap satirizes the hypermasculine theater of
Spinal Tap and heavy metal, the film transcends mean-spirited ridicule.
Thomas Hobbes, one of many thinkers who have mused on the psychology
of humor, explained laughter as a sudden rush of self-esteem occurring
when we imagine our superiority over the situation or state of others (quoted
in Munro 91). At first glance, the humor of This Is Spinal Tap would seem
to fit this formula, as we guffaw at the naive antics of this untalented band
on their descent from stardom. Yet humor is not necessarily grounded in
snearing contempt (though it sometimes is) but often stems from a more
democratic view in which we all look pretty much alike in our weaknesses,
pretenses, and fundamental loavleness. This Is Spinal Tap makes its major
characters (Nigel, David, and Derek) into likable fools, quite boyish and
gentle despite their macho posing and tough lyrics. Though we feel con-
ﬁdent they would ﬁnd some way to blithely rationalize total failure, we
nonetheless cheer for when they reunite for a road tour.

The North American trend of canceled gigs and disintegration, char-
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The North American tour temporarily sends the band on a downward trend of canceled gigs and interpersonal conflict. This move toward defeat and disintegration, characteristic of ironic narrative structure, culminates at the “End of Tour Party” in Los Angeles. The scene begins with a reverse zoom from two old women lying on lawn chairs by the pool, an image expressing the opposite of energy and power, and suggesting that the band has lost its adolescent male audience. Nigel and Ian have quit the band and are absent, and the small number of guests makes the party seem lonely. One interviewer, in a reference to the Scorsese film, asks David if this is Spinal Tap’s “Last Waltz.” David freely philosophizes about what “the end” really means, in an attempt to avoid the implications of the question. Derek and Nigel then engage in a classic example of rationalization. Derek asks, “Who wants to be a forty-five-year-old rock ‘n roller farting around for people less than half our age, cracking out some mediocre head-banging bullshit? . . . It’s beneath us.” They begin to talk about future projects—for example, a rock musical based on the life of Jack the Ripper (“You’re a naughty one, saucy Jack”)—that suggest a continued naïve promotion of “retarded sexuality.” They conclude that they are “lucky.” “People should be envying us,” Derek says optimistically. “I envy us.”

The film’s ironic ending is essential to its project. Backstage, before their planned last show, Nigel returns unexpectedly to “deliver a message” from Ian. “Sex Farm” is on the charts in Japan, and Ian wonders whether the band would be interested in re-forming to tour there. David at first acts outraged at the suggestion but later asks Nigel to join the band onstage, and Spinal Tap is reunited. The traditional male bond is reestablished, and Jeanine, the feminine “intruder,” is no longer seen on the stage. The film’s narrative ends with a return to former “glory,” as the energized band plays to wildly cheering crowds in Tokyo. Jeanine and Ian give each other cold glances, enduring an uneasy truce.

This is both a comic and an ironic ending. However much it seems “tacked on” or “throwaway,” it softens the hard edge—the bleakness—of irony by ending with the comedy of social integration. This Is Spinal Tap encourages allegiance with the band members, and especially with Nigel, David, and Derek. Thus when the band reunites and their fortunes take a wildly fortuitous turn, the audience may be relieved. However, the ending cannot be taken at face value, for this social integration also signifies moral defeat. It ironically suggests that the band has learned nothing from its trials, that its newfound fortunes are undeserved and temporary, and
that an audience can be found for just about any music, as long as it's for sale. Moreover, the ending furthers the film's critique of gender discourse in rock culture: this return to the status quo also reconfirms Spinal Tap's hypermasculine posturing.

The ending also raises problematic issues for the film's cultural critique, suggesting ideological contradictions in its thematic project. Portraying Jeanine as a stereotyped "bitch" encourages us to take pleasure in her final exclusion and the re-formation of the original male group and to justify such pleasure by appealing to her personal shortcomings—her controlling nature, lack of humor, inability to manage the band, and so on. The critique of gender relations in This Is Spinal Tap would have been far stronger had Jeanine been made a more likable, well-rounded character with negative and positive qualities like those of Nigel, David, and Derek. Had she been portrayed more sympathetically, This Is Spinal Tap would more clearly highlight the cultural practices leading to her exclusion.

Among the handful of pseudo-documentaries and documentary parodies, This Is Spinal Tap is most similar to Zelig and Bob Roberts. While This Is Spinal Tap may in fact have deceived some spectators, its status as parody and satire depends on the spectator's recognition of its numerous comic markers. The audience must recognize the film as a "false" documentary to fully appreciate its art. The same is true for Zelig and Bob Roberts, during which the viewer recognizes that despite textual markers indexing the films as "documentary," Woody Allen and Tim Robbins play fictional characters in fiction films.

Films that satirize the documentary, such as Mondo Cane (1963) and Chris Marker's Letter from Siberia (1987), target the "serious" or "classical" documentary by pointing to silly, incongruous, or shocking subjects, while ironically wearing the mantle of serious investigation. In contrast to these films, the purpose of This Is Spinal Tap is not primarily to mock or investigate the sober informational function of the conventional documentary but, like Zelig and Bob Roberts, to mimic the documentary for other ends. Thus Bob Roberts explores the relationships between popular culture and the American electoral process, and Zelig examines the possibility of finding personal identity in a world where illusion and reality seem confused, and where the self is defined from the outside.

The effect of This Is Spinal Tap, then, is not so much to explore the nature of documentary as to focus outward, onto another kind of representation—what we might call the social representation of the self. Bob Roberts, Zelig, and This Is Spinal Tap all explore social representation—the representation of the self as political figure (Bob Roberts) or masculine ideal (This Is Spinal Tap) or the social construction of personal identity generally.

(2) As Hutcheon notes, saut de "art" (1987): both satire and parasitical codes or practices. In this critique heavy metal genreism "hypermasculine" mythology, strict, values feminine qua

Thanks to the editors for their insights.

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2. I assume here that This Is Spinal Tap actors playing roles—that mimics this division is too neat. Some deli together, pointing out that all (so i know) and various manipulations, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Neupert (Austin: University of Texas, is somewhat beside the imagination of the manipulation—accurate, is somewhat beside the imagination of the manipulation—accurate, is somewhat beside the imagination of the manipulation. A perfect copy or replica of "the re because through it the filmmaker and because when audiences re viewing strategies than they do in New in Nonfiction Film (Cambridge, chapters 1 and 2.

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generally
(Zelig). As Hutcheon notes, satire is a means “of bringing the ‘world’ into
art” (104); both satire and parody are useful to contest and/or examine so-
cial codes or practices. In this way This Is Spinal Tap uses satire to examine
and critique heavy metal generally and, in particular, its promotion of a
“hypermasculine” mythology, an ethos that reduces sexuality to animal in-
stincts, devalues feminine qualities, and excludes women.

Notes

Thanks to the editors for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Reiner has since become successful as a director and, to a lesser extent, actor,
with The Princess Bride (1987), When Harry Met Sally (1989), Misery (1990), and A
Few Good Men (1992) among his directorial credits.

2. I assume here that This Is Spinal Tap is a fiction film—with a loose script and
actors playing roles—that mimics the forms of nonfiction. Some might object that
this division is too neat. Some deny a distinction between fiction and nonfiction al-
together, pointing out that all (so-called) nonfictions must make use of imaginative
form and various manipulations, and thus resemble fictions. See Jacques Aumont,
Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet, Aesthetics of Film, trans. Richard
Neupert (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 77–79. This observation, while
accurate, is somewhat beside the point. A film is nonfiction not because it lacks
imagination or the manipulation of its materials (as though a nonfiction should be
a perfect copy or replica of “the real”) but because it is socially marked or indexed,
because through it the filmmakers make direct assertions about the actual world,
and because when audiences recognize a film as nonfiction, they mobilize different
viewing strategies than they do in the case of fiction. See my Rhetoric and Repre-
sentation in Nonfiction Film (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially
chapters 1 and 2.

The ontological status of the band is more difficult to gauge; after the success
of the film, Spinal Tap first played at clubs in Los Angeles and New York, next on
Saturday Night Live, and then on a full-fledged concert tour. Spinal Tap at that point
had become an actual band, but were Guest, McKeen, and Shearer members of the
band or simply playing the roles of band members who are fictional characters?

3. An actual heavy metal band would more likely incorporate death than birth
imagery into its stage show. This is one respect in which Spinal Tap misses the
mark in its imitation of heavy metal.

4. One significant development in heavy metal has been androgynous bands
such as Poison and Motley Crüe, and the adoption by male performers of makeup,
costumes, and elaborate hairstyles that have traditionally been associated with fe-
male display. While some commentators see such bands as progressive in their
deliberate confusion of traditional gender boundaries (Walser 131–33). I prefer a
less sanguine explanation for their popularity. "Glam" metal, with its stage flam-
boyance, is calculated to appeal to young women, with whom it finds its largest
audience. (Male heavy metal fans are often disdainful of the subgenre.) Through
the performers, who are "made-up" in traditionally feminine ways, females gain iden-
tificatory entry into a "masculine" world of aggressive power, without threatening
traditional feminine identity. This Is Spinal Tap was released just as such bands were
gaining popularity. Although during concert performances the band occasionally
wears stage makeup, the film deals little with the phenomenon of androgyny.

5. I use the terms "irony" and "comedy" here much as Northrop Frye uses them
in The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
1957). Although romance, tragedy, comedy, and irony are usually discussed in ref-
erence to the narrative structure of fiction, they are applicable to This Is Spinal Tap
for two reasons. First, I have argued that This Is Spinal Tap is fiction. Second, even
were this not the case, Hayden White, in his Metahistory: The Historical Imagination
in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973),
has made a convincing argument that nonfiction texts, and specifically narrative
histories, make use of the kind of narrative structures Frye describes. Various schol-
ars have extended White's claims beyond written histories to nonfiction films (e.g.,
Nichols 60, 143, 244; Plantinga). Frye notes that narrative forms are often mixed, as
This Is Spinal Tap blends comic and ironic narrative structure to become an ironic
comedy. It features the social integration characteristic of comedy but one that
signifies the moral disintegration of irony.

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