Humor and the Documentary

*The Four Humor Mechanisms (Neuendorf & Skalski et al.; see also the extended handout on the class web site)*

2. **Incongruity**: The juxtaposition of inconsistent or incongruous elements, e.g., wordplay (e.g., puns), “pure” incongruity, absurdity, and sight gags (Schopenhauer in Martin, 2007; Koestler, 1964).
3. **Arousal/Dark**: The creation of a high level of physiological arousal, e.g., slapstick, dark humor, sick humor, and sexual or naughty humor (Kant & Spencer; Spencer, 1860; Berlyne, 1972).
4. **Social currency**: Playful interaction, or building a sense of group belonging or understanding, e.g., joking to fit in, joking around socially, inside jokes, and parody (relying on a shared view of a known form, such as a film genre) (Chapman, 1983; Fry, 1963).

**Satire vs. Parody**

Parody deals with literary/cinematic norms (at the level of the cultural product)
Satire deals with social/political norms (at the level of the culture or society)

There is sometimes confusion between the two, perhaps because they may be used together (e.g., Western movie parody + satire on racism = *Blazing Saddles*)

**Four Stages of Genre Development (Giannetti and others)**

1. Primitive
2. Classical
3. Revisionist
4. Parodic
**Humor and Documentaries:**

1. **[Social] Satire**
   
   Primary mechanisms: Disparagement, Incongruity
   
   Examples:
   
   - *A Propos de Nice* (D: Jean Vigo, 1930)
   - *Mondo Cane* (D: Paolo Cavara, Franco Prosperi, Gualtiero Jacopetti, 1962)
   - *The Atomic Cafe* (D: Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty, Pierce Rafferty, 1982)
   - *Roger and Me* (and major portions of all other Michael Moore docs) (D: Michael Moore, 1989)
   - *East Side Story* (D: Dana Ranga, 1997)—documenting the Soviet Bloc musical genre
   - *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (D: Larry Charles, 2006)
   - *Religulous* (D: Larry Charles, 2008)

2. **Parody = The Mockumentary** (where fictional information is presented in documentary form, often quoting back to known authentic documentaries)
   
   Primary mechanisms: Social currency
   
   Examples:
   
   - Shorts by *Robert Benchley* (1928-1944; e.g., *Sex Life of the Polyp*, 1928; *The Causes of the Depression*, 1931; *How to Sleep*, 1935; *How to Vote*, 1936; *How to Start the Day*, 1937; *How to Eat*, 1939)
   - *Las Hurdes/Land Without Bread* (D: Luis Bunuel, 1933)
   - The BBC 1957 April Fools “Swiss Spaghetti Harvest” hoax
   - *Take the Money and Run* (D: Woody Allen, 1969)
   - *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash* (D: Eric Idle, Gary Weiss, 1978)
   - *Zelig* (D: Woody Allen, 1983)
   - *This is Spinal Tap* (D: Rob Reiner, 1984)
   - *The Last Polka* (D: John Blanchard, W: John Candy & Eugene Levy, 1985)
   - *Best in Show* (D: Christopher Guest, 2000)—and other films by Guest
   - *Incident at Loch Ness* (D: Zak Penn, W: Werner Herzog & Zak Penn, 2004)
   - *Farce of the Penguins* (D: Bob Saget, 2007)
   - *I’m Still Here* (D: Casey Affleck, 2010; W: Casey Affleck & Joaquin Phoenix)
   - *On the Ropes* (D: Mark Noyce, Hamdy Taha, 2011)
   
   And various TV series, e.g.: *The Office* (2005+ in the U.S.); *Arrested Development* (2005+); *Modern Family* (2009+);
   - *Parks and Recreation* (2009+)

   And of course: *Documentary Now!* (2015+)
3. **“Found” Humor** (Eccentrics on Parade?)—close to Social Satire, but at a more micro level; humor is located in the specific subjects of the documentary
   Primary mechanisms: Incongruity, Disparagement
   Examples:
   - *Grey Gardens* (D: Ellen Hoyde, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Muffie Meyer, 1975)
   - *Gates of Heaven* (D: Errol Morris, 1978)
   - *In Heaven There is No Beer?* (D: Les Blank & Maureen Gosling, 1984)
   - *The King of Kong: Fistful of Quarters* (D: Seth Gordon, 2007)
   - *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (D: Banksy, 2010)
   - Many “reality TV” series—e.g., *The Jersey Shore, The Osbournes, Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo*

4. **Instigated Humor**—similar to “Found” Humor, and may overlap with Social Satire; humor is extracted from subjects’ reactions to actions by the filmmakers or their representatives
   Primary mechanisms: Disparagement, Incongruity
   Examples:
   - *Candid Camera* and its offspring (e.g., *Punk’d*)

5. **Humor as a Device to Aid in Persuasion**—Humor may be used in similar fashion to Alfred Hitchcock’s insertion of humor in his films...to release tension. Or, more explicitly, humor may be used as a component in a persuasive attempt...as documentarist Morgan Spurlock has said, "When you start to laugh, your barriers come down...without even realizing it, we become receptive to information, or a way of thinking that we haven't had before."
   Primary mechanisms: Disparagement (inc. Self-deprecation)
   Examples:
   - *Bowling for Columbine* (D: Michael Moore, 2002)
   - *Super Size Me* (D: Morgan Spurlock, 2004)
   - *Where in the World is Osama Bin Laden?* (D: Morgan Spurlock, 2008)

6. **Unintentional Humor** (so bad it’s funny)
   Primary mechanisms: Incongruity, Social currency if it’s “cult”...may actually be quite heartwarming
   Examples:
   - Social Engineering films, such as *Shake Hands with Danger, Lunchroom Manners* (various directors, 1940s – 1970s)
   - *Uncle Ernie’s TVT True Adventure Trails* (D: Ernie Culp, 1980s)

7. **Documentaries of Humor Performance** (a type of “concert film” documentary)
   Primary mechanisms: Whatever the performer’s focus is
   Examples:
   - *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* (D: Jeff Margolis, 1979)
   - *This Filthy World* (D: Jeff Garlin, W: John Waters, 2006)
   - *Kevin Hart: Let Me Explain* (D: Leslie Hart & Tim Story, 2013)
8. **Documentaries of Humorous Behaviors**  
Primary mechanisms: Arousal/Dark  
Examples:  
*Jackass the Movie* (D: Jeff Tremaine, 2002)  
*Jackass 3D* (D: Jeff Tremaine, 2010)

9. **Documentaries about humor**—These seem to be more and more popular  
Primary mechanisms: Whatever the focus is; often Arousal/Dark  
Examples:  
*The Aristocrats* (D: Penn Jillette & Paul Provenza, 2005)—a feature-length documentary about the legendary transgressive joke  
*Heckler* (D: Michael Addis, 2007)  
*History of the Joke* (D: Dave Greene, 2008)  
*Make ’Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America* (PBS series, 2008)  
*Make Fun* (D: Jim Tews, Ramon Rivas II, 2012)—about Cleveland’s comedy scene  
*Comedy Warriors: Healing Through Humor* (D: John Wagner, 2013)  
*Live from New York!* (D: Bao Nguyen, 2015)  
*Misery Loves Comedy* (D: Kevin Pollak, 2015)  
*Dying Laughing* (D: Paul Toogood, Lloyd Stanton, 2017)  
*The Last Laugh* (D: Ferne Pearlstein, 2017)—about taboos and comedy