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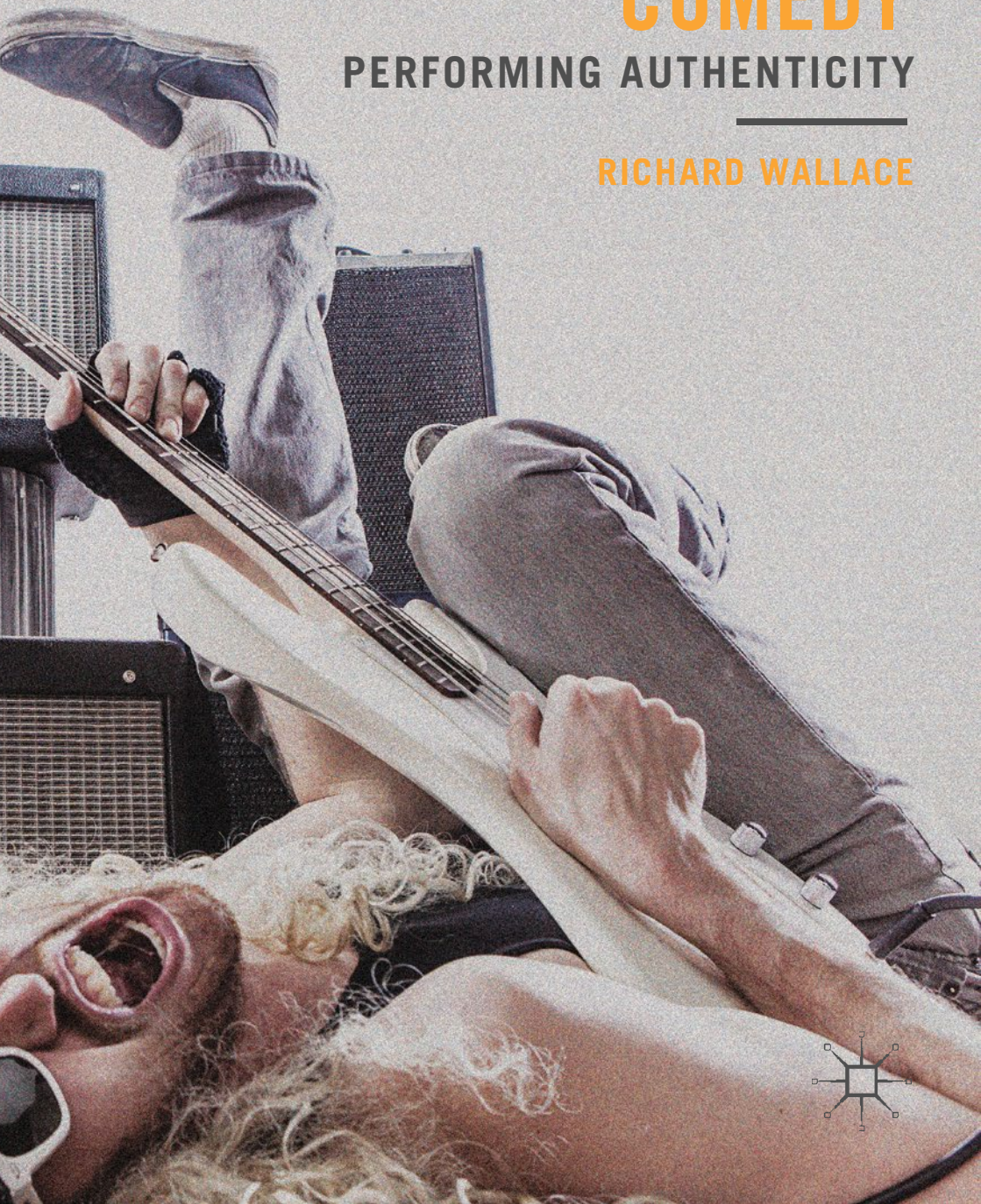
RICHARD WALLACE



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Mockumentary Comedy

Performing Authenticity

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For Lauren, Audrey, and my parents

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CHAPTER 1

The Fine Line between Stupid and Clever: An Introduction

Spaghetti

Situated in the BBC television schedule between the first episode of a new series of *Hancock's Half-Hour* (1956–1960) and coverage of an international boxing match, the BBC's flagship current affairs programme *Panorama* (1953–) began in ordinary fashion at 8:30 p.m. on Monday 1 April 1957. At that time, each episode of *Panorama* covered a number of topical items in a magazine format, and since it was broadcast live and was not telerecorded, only two pre-filmed items remain in the BBC's archive. One of these is a short location-based report on life in a village in the Ticino region of Switzerland. In the report, the distinctive voice of *Panorama* presenter Richard Dimbleby describes the mild winter recently experienced in the area, the early arrival of spring and the concomitantly premature, but welcome, appearance of 'bees and blossoms' to the village. So far, so (apparently) factual.

However, things take a surprising turn with Dimbleby's question, 'But what has this got to do with food?' This is answered by the jovial trill of a zither, which up to this point has remained firmly in the background of the report's soundtrack, and a cut from a close-up of tree blossoms to a wide shot of another tree, leaden with long, white strands of what Dimbleby's narration identifies as an 'exceptionally heavy spaghetti crop'. The second half of the report then follows a family of spaghetti farmers as they pick and dry the spaghetti ready for international export. The use of maps, diagrams and what appears to be authentic library footage of birds,

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bees and blossoms underpin the report with a factual foundation and Dimbleby's description of 'the virtual disappearance of the spaghetti weevil' and the 'many years of patient endeavour by plant breeders' to generate a spaghetti crop of uniform length is delivered in what Richard Lindley has called Dimbleby's 'usual genial, authoritative and helpfully informative style' (2002: 50).

Dimbleby's presence is vital to the segment's effectiveness as an elaborate practical joke, and the narration itself was explicitly praised by Leonard Miall, Head of Talks, as a key part of the segment's success.[1] The BBC's public service remit was also exploited to great effect, courting *Panorama*'s presumed audience of politically, socially and culturally engaged viewers. Nowhere is this clearer than when the narration compares Swiss and Italian modes of spaghetti production, suggesting that 'many of you, I'm sure, will have seen pictures of the vast spaghetti plantations in the Po valley'. Of course, viewers would have seen no such thing; they do not exist. However, Dimbleby's invitation to participate in the verification process may have been too much for some viewers to resist.

One should try and avoid the trap of characterising historical viewers of television as being more naïve than those of today's programmes, or, indeed, in the suggestion that audio-visual hybridity would have been inherently unfamiliar. It may be the case that hybrid forms are more numerous in the twenty-first century, but the production folders in the BBC's Written Archive Centre show that a number of viewers clearly understood *Panorama*'s joke, and in various ways attempted to participate in it. One document provides a summary of telegram messages sent by viewers to Dimbleby. These messages include a faux-complaint about exploitative working practices—'Protesting to my union BBC publisizing [*sic*] unsporting Swiss Picking Spaghetti in close season'—and another viewer's concerns that they'd got the facts wrong: 'What nonsense. Everyone knows Spaghetti is a root crop grown in radio holes drilled to length by trained worms.'[2] However, the same document also acknowledges the apparent scarcity of such feedback, and a handwritten note appended to the bottom of the typed document—'Thank God there are still some people who can see a joke'—suggests that most responses seem to have taken the report at face value.

Although the episode itself does not exist in its entirety, the draft script does. From this we can see that 'Swiss Spaghetti Harvest' was the last item of the show, inhabiting what has become the customary 'and finally' novelty slot in the news flow. It was also followed by Dimbleby's closing

address to viewers, 'And there we end "Panorama" on this first day of April. Good-night', a clear invitation to viewers to revise their views of the segment. Coming at the end of an otherwise serious programme which also contained straightforwardly factual items on the release from exile of the controversial Cypriot politician Makarios III, a royal gala performance of the film *Yangtse Incident: The Story of H.M.S. Amethyst* (1957), an in-studio wine tasting and a film from Poland by Christopher Chataway, the item reached an audience for whom—according to a BBC statement made later that evening—spaghetti may have been 'considered […] an exotic delicacy' (Sutherland 2009: 10). The replication of the grammar of television journalism lends the report a strong element of credibility, and the straight-laced nature of the film meant that even with Dimbleby's interjection, for many viewers, the date—and thus the April Fool's joke—was overlooked; for a few minutes it appeared as if spaghetti really did grow on trees.

This is a book about the mockumentary, and more specifically about mockumentary comedy. It concerns those fictional media texts which make it their job to imitate the aesthetics and stylistic conventions of documentary and other forms of factual media for comic ends and suggests that paying close attention to the mechanics of comedy through detailed textual analysis reveals the form's critical and reflexive nature. It is an important contention of the book that this reflexivity is not always a primary or even explicit concern of these popular texts. Instead, the argument put forward here is that mockumentary comedy's primary purpose is to make people laugh, and that it achieves this through strategies of comic performance; by the actors/performers who appear in mockumentaries, but also by the texts' performance of factual media's stylistic conventions. In doing so it cannot help but be reflexive in relation to both its subject matter and the documentary form from which it gets its stylistic inspiration.

Despite its short three-minute duration, 'Swiss Spaghetti Harvest' (as the *Panorama* segment will be referred to from now on) is a fascinating example of mockumentary comedy. It demonstrates the ways in which a fundamentally comic item, on the surface little more than an elaborate audio-visual joke, is actually undertaking something far more challenging. Viewers were taken in by the hoax, and many complained that *Panorama*'s status as a trusted current affairs programme made it an unsuitable vehicle for such a joke. Although it is surely not the case that the primary intention of those responsible for the item was to destabilise the audience's faith

in the BBC's factual programming at a general level, this does appear to have been a secondary (if relatively minor) effect, if the reminiscences of viewers collected for the BBC's website are to be believed (Anon 2005).

'Swiss Spaghetti Harvest' demonstrated the ease with which factual modes of broadcasting could be imitated for comic ends. In doing so it made the audience recognise, even if only through implication, that the aesthetics of factuality are imitable, malleable and unstable. The aesthetic elements that commonly make up factual media are very recognisable and include (but are not limited to) talking head interviews, hand-held improvised camera movements, 'voice of God' narration (Corner 1996: 30), the presence of a presenter and archival audio-visual material (footage, documents, photographs etc.). John Parris Springer and Gary D. Rhodes call these components '"false" signifiers of reality' (2006: 8) because they do not guarantee truthfulness. They 'signify' reality because they have become associated with documentary and factual forms where they are most frequently found. However, they are 'false' signifiers because they can be easily imitated, fabricated or falsified. As documentary filmmaker Errol Morris once claimed, '[t]ruth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything' (Bates 1989: 17), and so using the aesthetic qualities of factual media as a marker of truthfulness is a fool's errand. David Wheeler, *Panorama*'s producer, was clear about this when interviewed for the BBC News website for an item about the hoax in 2004, noting that

> We were criticised for doing it but I had no regrets about it at all. I think it was a good idea for people to be aware they couldn't believe everything they saw on the television and that they ought to adopt a slightly critical attitude to it. (Anon 2004)

Mockumentary Definitions

Questions of definition have significantly shaped the terms of what and how the mockumentary has been discussed. Three published lists of mockumentary film and television texts have been compiled (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 190–203; Hight 2013a; Miller 2009b) and all three lists are different. Although I consider both *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *The Thick of It* (2005–2012) to be mockumentaries—and this book discusses both in detail *as* mockumentaries—neither text appears in any of the lists.[3] Conversely, Peter Watkins's drama-documentary *Culloden* (1964), which

plays with documentary conventions, but remains predominantly factual, appears in all of the lists. Although all definitions of the mockumentary genre are more complex than simply suggesting that the form lies in the areas where fact and fiction merge, it is as a result of the inflexible (yet also inconsistent) ways in which the form's boundaries have been defined up to this point that several important texts, and particularly comedies, have been left out from the discussion. I question the usefulness of attempting to find a strongly defined space within this grey area of hybridity which can accommodate texts as varied in style, tone and address as *Culloden*, *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) and the BBC *Wednesday Play* (1964–1970) docudrama 'Cathy Come Home' (1966), yet excludes *A Hard Day's Night* and *The Thick of It*.

It is possible that one of the reasons why comedy has been sidelined from existing scholarship is that certain branches of the mockumentary corpus have been rendered invisible to scholars due to the terms used to define the form and the predominant focus on documentary reflexivity. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight offer a basic definition of the mockumentary as 'fictional texts which to varying degrees "look" (and sound) like documentaries' (2001: 1). For Cynthia J. Miller, 'mockumentaries may be thought of comprising a range, or continuum, of hybrid fictional texts that borrow from documentary modes to achieve their own ends' (2009a: 4). Unlike, say, Robert Flaherty's re-enactments of reality when filming *Nanook of the North* (1922), mockumentaries do this intentionally with hybridity in mind (ibid.: 5).

Providing a more nuanced definition, Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner suggest that mockumentaries are

> fiction films that make use of (copy, mock, mimic, gimmick) documentary style and therefore acquire its associated content (the moral and social) and associated feelings (belief, trust, authenticity) to create a documentary experience defined by their antithesis, self-conscious distance. (2006: 7)

Here, the authors clarify a potentially problematic area, by noting that the films are fictional, 'in that they control some aspects of the profilmic with scripting, performance, direction of actors, manipulation of mise-en-scène' (ibid.: 8). They also gesture towards characterising mockumentary viewing as offering a particular experience, notably one that involves the 'associated feelings' of watching a documentary. This idea that fiction films might encourage a 'documentary mode of engagement', to quote

Bill Nichols (1991: 25), Jane Roscoe (2000: 5) and Annette Hill (2008), is compelling, although I argue throughout this book that the experience is more complicated than this.

Each of these definitions goes some way towards helping us position the mockumentary within the porous landscape of fact–fiction hybridity. However, it remains the case that a film such as *A Hard Day's Night* fits all of these definitions—it is a fiction, it uses documentary techniques and the choice of aesthetic hybridity is intentional—yet this is the first study that attempts to directly address the film *as* a mockumentary. Indeed it may be the first to recognise that it is one to begin with.

This neglect may be the result of definitions being drawn in relation to a further factor that seems so obvious it hardly needs stating, yet it is based on an assumption that I will challenge throughout this book: for a text to be classed as a mockumentary there has to be a documentary crew (seen or unseen) explicitly situated within the diegesis. This is a distinction made by Craig Hight in relation to Robert Altman's fictional political television series *Tanner '88* (1988), which the author suggests is 'frequently mistakenly described as a mockumentary' because it 'uses hand-held video cameras […] but does not seek to maintain the pretence that there is an actual camera crew present' (2010: 148, 150). If this is a common, though mostly unspoken assumption, it might go some way towards explaining why texts such as *A Hard Day's Night*, *I'm Alan Partridge* (1997–2002) and *The Thick of It* are absent from existing studies of the form.[4] None of these texts explicitly features a diegetic camera crew, though they do gesture towards the implicit presence of one through their style, and so they maintain a documentary experience similar to that described by Juhasz and Lerner.

Another key argument of this book, then, is that given the transformations made within the form over the last two decades, the mockumentary should be defined more broadly, and that determining how we understand a media form on the basis of a single criteria—in this case, the explicit presence of a documentary crew—is a very limiting pursuit. Indeed, were we to define the straight documentary form itself through such strict criteria we would end up in a situation where such self-evident examples of the form as *Dont Look Back* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967) and *Salesman* (Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin, 1968)—indeed almost the entire early observational documentary oeuvre—would be excluded because the presence of the camera crew is rarely directly acknowledged even though the existence of the films themselves are a testament to the fact that film crews *were* there.[5]

This desire to broaden the definitions is driven in part by my urge to discuss texts which I believe to be instructive to the study of the mockumentary, but which have been excluded. However, it is also led by the transformations which have taken place within both the mockumentary itself and the wider landscape of factual media since the turn of the century. John Corner (2002) has spoken of a 'post-documentary' televisual landscape in which the boundaries between factual and fictional forms has collapsed, particularly in regard to the phenomena of reality television. Similarly, Raymond Williams (1989) talks about the existence of an increasingly 'dramatised society' as a result of the ubiquity of dramatic television in our lives. This intermingling of fact and fiction is now a key and visible function of much television documentary (and drama), and so it follows that the balance of factual and fictional elements within the mockumentary has followed documentary in what Derek Paget has called a 'drift towards Hollywood' (2011: 272).

I am also taken by Paget's turn away from discussing the 'blurred boundaries' of hybridity towards Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis's notion of 'porosity' (1925). For Paget this shift suggests an '*opening up* of both documentary and drama spaces' (2011: 273) that relaxes the drive towards categorisation, or what Benjamin and Lacis call the 'stamp of the definitive' (1925: 166). The notion of porosity embraces the multi-directional free movement of aspects, artefacts and ideas between factual, fictional and all other media forms. In this context, the maintenance of strict boundaries is a questionable practice, whilst probing how these diffuse elements operate becomes an interesting question. In opening up the boundaries of media forms, we should likewise open up the boundaries of our definitions, and my aim here is to address a number of texts (particularly *A Hard Day's Night*, *The Thick of It* and *Tanner '88*) which embody this porosity and which, in turn, can enrich our understanding of the mockumentary form, even if they do not contain an explicitly acknowledged diegetic documentary camera crew.

Moving away from such strict criteria opens up the possibility of discussing the mockumentary as an element of the wider—porous—fact–fiction landscape alongside, and overlapping with, documentary drama and other hybrid media forms. To borrow an idea articulated by Lisa Gitelman, all of these forms 'share the same groundwater' (2008: 153). The mockumentary is not bound by hard definitions, but can accept a range of texts whose direct relationship to the documentary form can be very strong or relatively weak, whilst still being recognisable as an example of the mockumentary form.

Broadly, therefore, I consider the mockumentary to include texts where the immediate subject matter is fictional, but where the visual style is one that resembles a pre-existing mode of non-fiction media, or, significantly, where this style resembles *other mockumentaries*. This definition is deliberately wide-ranging and includes fake radio news, fake documentary films, fake television documentaries and the imitation of non-fiction television programmes such as chat shows, game shows and adverts. To be truly classed as a mockumentary there must be some level of intentionality involved in the fiction looking like it is factual, though this does not necessarily have to extend so far as to include the presence of a diegetic documentary crew.

Early History

The mockumentary has a lengthy history which, if we limit ourselves to fully formed iterations, we can date back to Orson Welles's legendary 1938 'War of the Worlds' episode of the radio drama strand *Mercury Theatre on the Air* (1938). This live radio broadcast saw a Martian invasion communicated to radio listeners as a series of escalating news flashes, interrupting a programme of concert music. Three years later, *Citizen Kane* (1941) conveyed the life of Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles) to cinema audiences via a half-finished episode of 'News on the March', a meticulously faked newsreel that Thomas Doherty describes as the mockumentary's '*locus classicus*' (2003: 22) The fake newsreel inserted into an otherwise straightforwardly fictional film has become common and can be found in Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936), Republic's 1939 adventure serial *Dick Tracy's G-Men* (1939) and the Ealing comedy *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) among many others, as well as in the animated films *Up* (2009) and *9* (2009), even though the original reference point would surely be entirely unfamiliar to their target audience of children.

Springer and Rhodes suggest that '[a]t first glance the genre of the mockumentary would seem to be the postmodern cinematic form *par excellence*' due to its 'rhetorical modes of parody, pastiche, and self-referential irony' (2006: 5). However, it should be recognised that many of the elements central to the form's operation have been in existence for many decades, even centuries. Fiction taking factual form is the key structuring device of the epistolary novel which dates back to the fifteenth century, where narrative is conveyed through faked factual documents such as letters, diaries and newspaper reports, the most famous example of which may be Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* ([1719] 2007).

Cinematically, the intermingling of fact and fiction dates back to the earliest moving images. For Raymond Fielding, *Corbett and Courtney Before the Kinematograph* (1894) has 'the dubious distinction of being the first fake news film' (1972: 10), and

> [f]or every genuine news film photographed under difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, an equal amount of energy was spent by the same producers to fake outstanding news events of the day. (Ibid.: 37)

The logistical issues and technological limitations involved in filming factual subjects with primitive film stock and without synchronised sound or portable camera equipment meant that the (re-)staging of events in relatively controlled conditions was a requirement: *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) contains two infamously faked sequences amongst the mostly genuine footage (Fraser et al. 2009: 170) and much of *Night Mail* (1936) was shot on sets to ease the logistics of production (Winston 2008: 129). More famously, Robert Flaherty's use of re-enactments during the filming of *Nanook of the North* and *Man of Aran* (1934) were justified on the grounds that '[o]ne often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit' (Chapman 2009: 171). This view mirrors John Grierson's well-known provocation that documentary is the 'creative treatment of actuality' (1933: 8). For these early pioneers of the documentary form, dramatisation—and thus fictionalisation—were necessary components of documentary's claims of 'truthfulness', though unlike the subjects of the mockumentary, theirs remained fundamentally grounded in the real world.

The mockumentary as a deliberate and intentional mode of sustained stylistic presentation flourished during the 1960s, in parallel with the popularity of what has come to be known as the observational mode of documentary filmmaking (Nichols 1991: 38–44), also known as direct cinema in the USA or *cinéma vérité* in Europe. The most significant examples during this period include *A Hard Day's Night*, *The War Game* (1965)—Peter Watkins's graphic depiction of nuclear war that was banned for supposedly being 'too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting' (Cook 2017: 41)—*David Holzman's Diary* (1967) and Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run* (1969).[6] Elements common to the mockumentary can also be found during this period in a number of significant docu-dramas produced by the BBC as part of its *Wednesday Play* strand including 'Cathy Come Home' and 'Up the Junction' (1965), both of which offer 'an experience of the real' (Caughie 2000: 111) through the use of what John

Caughie calls the 'documentary gaze' (2000: 110–112), and which demonstrate a flourishing of hybrid modes of representation across television drama and British cinema more generally (Caughie 1980). In addition, spoof chat shows, fake news reports and faux documentary items were also regular features of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969–1974), demonstrating a clear sense of a medium in conversation with itself.

The position of the mockumentary form across media (particularly film, television and radio) speaks towards questions of medium specificity, particularly in the way it seems to be aligned to specific media at particular moments. Miller (2012b) alludes to the potentially challenging nature of the mockumentary in the title of the edited collection *Too Bold for the Box Office*, though it could equally be argued that at various points in its history the mockumentary has also been 'too bold for broadcasting'. *The War Game* was not shown on television until 1985, however it *was* granted a limited cinematic release in 1966, suggesting that it was precisely its status *as television* that made it problematic.[7] In contrast to cinema audiences who would be unlikely to mistake their film screening for a breaking news flash, the flow of broadcast television meant that the chance that television audiences might turn on or switch over part way through, be unsure of what they were watching or hearing, and mistake it for reality was a possibility, however unlikely. There is, therefore, a loose, but observable shift regarding the sites of mockumentary texts, with most of the form's earliest examples appearing on cinema screens (the above examples, plus *Punishment Park* [1971], *Cannibal Holocaust* [1980], *The Falls* [1980] and *Real Life* [1979]) before it became a more regular feature of both television and cinema from the mid-1980s. This is, however, a rough tendency, and there are a number of one-off television mockumentaries that appear on television before then, with *Alternative 3* (1977) and *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash* (1978) being just two.

Recent History

Brett Mills has argued that the television sitcom has undergone significant formal rejuvenation through its adoption of 'the visual characteristics of verite [*sic*] […] for comedic purposes' (2004: 75). For Mills, this hybridisation has resulted in a form of comic television, epitomised by *The Royle Family* (1998–2012) and *The Office* (2001–2003), that '[interrogates] the processes and representations of media forms' (ibid.: 65), and which he labels 'comedy verite' (without the usual accents on vérité).

Mills's argument is supported by Jelle Mast who notes that comedy verite 'draws on and exposes the taken-for-granted conventions, claims and practices of this kind of television programming' (2009: 233).

Ethan Thompson usefully develops Mills's concept of comedy verite in an American context, suggesting that the adoption of a visual aesthetic derived from observational documentary is as much a practical and cultural concern as it is a self-reflexive strategy. For Thompson, the documentary aesthetic legitimates a kind of television (the sitcom) often seen as being a low form, elevating it as significant within a climate of media diversification and giving it—especially in HBO shows such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–)—a stamp of 'quality' (2007: 63–64). As he argues,

> within this context […] comedy verité can best be understood not as a subgenre of television comedy but as an emerging mode of production that is being adopted for its efficiency, visual complexity, and semiotic clout. (ibid.: 63)

Thompson is persuasive, but like Mills, also tends to erase the prior history of the mockumentary on television, discussing only *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992–1998) and 'a couple of notable appearances' (ibid.: 65) as single episodes of dramas such as *M*A*S*H* (1972–1983) and *ER* (1994–2009).[8]

I would argue instead that the explosion of programmes examined by both Mills and Thompson are the culmination of a wider process of comic exploration of the wider landscape of factuality programming which has been an ongoing concern of the mockumentary since the 1960s. As Ben Walters has argued,

> *The Office* […] fits neatly alongside British television comedies of its time in assuming audiences' familiarity with the circumstances of TV production and consumption, and exploiting such knowingness both for the purposes of humour and within its formal fabric. (2005: 104)

This could hardly be the case if this period of 'comedy verite' were the *beginning* of a process. Instead, it can be seen as simply a continuity and intensification of past mockumentary explorations.

In the mid-1980s, the mockumentary became a common sight on BBC Two through the spoof documentary sketches featured in *Victoria Wood: As Seen on TV* (1985–1987). On Channel 4 *The Comic Strip Presents…* (1982–) episodes 'Bad News Tour' (1983) and 'More Bad News' (1988) mimicked the fly-on-the-wall rock documentary, and 'Eddie Monsoon—A Life?' (1984) tackled investigative journalism. This was followed on the channel by the mockumentary series *This is David Lander* (1988) and its

successor *This is David Harper* (1990), where Stephen Fry and Tony Slattery, respectively, played the eponymous roving reporters. In 1989 Channel 4 parodied *The South Bank Show* (1978–) in Harry Enfield's *Norbert Smith—A Life*, complete with an appearance by Melvyn Bragg. This early commitment to the mockumentary by Channel 4 falls in line with its remit to 'encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes' (Broadcasting Act 1981: s11(1)(c)), and shows a willingness to challenge traditional forms of programming.

The mockumentary's alignment with particular broadcasters, particularly Channel 4 and BBC Two, during this period is significant, as is the fact that many television mockumentaries (including *This is David Lander*, *The Day Today* [1994], *Knowing Me, Knowing You with Alan Partridge* (1994–1995) and *People Like Us* (1999–2001) began as comedies on BBC Radio Four. Simon Cottle's notion of 'production ecology' (2004)—the idea that different groups of programme-makers working in the same field, but for different media institutions, inflect their programmes in different ways depending on a range of industrial factors—provides a framework for thinking about the ways in which the form developed between the 1980s and the mid-2000s. During this period a pool of talent including Rob Brydon, Steve Coogan, Julia Davis, Armando Iannucci and Chris Morris and their associated production companies (most notably TalkBack Productions and Baby Cow Productions) created a number of mockumentary versions of established non-fiction television formats. Morris and Iannucci's *The Day Today* (TalkBack) satirises television news; Coogan and Iannucci's *Knowing Me, Knowing You with Alan Partridge* (TalkBack) replicates the chat show format, and its follow-up *I'm Alan Partridge* (TalkBack) is a loose riff on the docu-soap; Morris's *Brass Eye* (TalkBack, 1997–2001) targets current affairs programmes; Brydon's *Marion and Geoff* (Baby Cow, 2000–2003) parodies the confessional video diary, as does Brydon and Davis's *Human Remains* (Baby Cow, 2000); and *Look around You* (TalkBack, 2002–2005) is a spoof of schools' educational programming. BBC Two in particular invested heavily in the mockumentary as part of its comedy line-up, and from December 1997 through to October 2002 the channel featured a series of mockumentary comedies—in the order of their first broadcast: *Operation Good Guys* (1997–2000), *People Like Us*, *Human Remains* and *The Office*—as part of its Monday evening, prime-time 'Comedy Zone' line-up.

This list raises particular questions about the gendering of the mockumentary. With the exception of Victoria Wood and Julia Davis, the significant production personnel are exclusively male. In addition, a significant

number of these turn-of-the-century mockumentaries seem to be poking fun at the docu-soap mode of factual television in particular. This problematically positions the docu-soap, which is often viewed as a feminised form of documentary programming, as the 'bad' cultural object when judged against the straight documentary's more 'serious' (read masculine?) past. It is lamentable that this is an area of the mockumentary that I have not had the space to explore in sufficient detail in this book, as it offers another significant way of understanding the form. I have, however, tried to gesture towards some of the significant aspects of this approach as they pertain to arguments made in this book within the endnotes.

Rather than following Mills's view that comedy verite is a product of developing sitcom style, I prefer to see these programmes as emerging from the mockumentary's experimentation with a wide range of comic and documentary forms. In this I am in alignment with Craig Hight, who suggests that comedy verite texts can be seen as 'providing wider support for mockumentary experimentation by naturalising the use of vérité aesthetics in relation to sitcoms' (Hight 2010: 182) and that Chris Morris's work in particular 'helped to lay the foundation for a broader naturalisation of news satire in the television mainstream' (Hight 2013b: 53). For Hight, then, comedy verite texts might not all count as mockumentaries, but their mainstream presence has helped popularise the fake documentary aesthetic across British screens.

This increased visibility was only enhanced by the proliferation of the form in cinema since the mid-1980s, with particularly notable (and mostly comic) examples, including *Zelig* (1983), *This is Spinal Tap*, *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Man Bites Dog* (1992), *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1999), *Best in Show* (2000) and *A Mighty Wind* (2003). By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the mockumentary has become one of the most pervasive audio-visual trends, and has been embraced by filmmakers, broadcasters and audiences worldwide as 'an accepted part of the mainstream' (Hight 2010: 1). Popular cinematic genres such as the horror film have adopted the aesthetic conventions of the form, with dozens of films—including *Cloverfield* (2008), *Lake Mungo* (2008), and *Paranormal Activity* (2007)—following on the heels of *The Blair Witch Project*. On television the mockumentary sitcom has become an internationally recognisable format in its own right, with *The Office: An American Workplace* (2005–2013), *The Thick of It*, *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), *Modern Family* (2009–), *Twenty Twelve* (2011–2012), *Veep* (2012–), *W1A* (2014–), *The Life of Rock with Brian Pern* (2014–2016), and *Documentary Now!*

(2015–) barely scratching the surface of recent UK and US examples. Australia and New Zealand have their own heritage of mockumentary comedy with *Forgotten Silver* (1995), *The Games* (1998–2000), *Kath and Kim* (2002–2007) and the work of Chris Lilley being particularly popular, and as Cynthia J. Miller notes, 'recent additions to the genre have originated in Germany, Russia, Sweden, and Iran' (Miller 2012a: xii). The BBC's decision to include the Matt Lucas and David Walliams mockumentary *Come Fly With Me* (2010–2011) as part of its Christmas Day BBC One line-up in 2010 marked the high point of the mockumentary's mainstream status. Indeed, the form's apparent ubiquity led Graham Linehan, writer of the sitcoms *Father Ted* (1995–1998), *Black Books* (2000–2004) and *The IT Crowd* (2006–2013), to ask, via Twitter, 'Is EVERY new American sitcom a mock-documentary? Sheesh!' (2011).[9]

The Field

Given that many mockumentaries are comedies, it is perhaps surprising that most of the critical writing on the mockumentary has tended to exclude comedy as a serious avenue of investigation. There has been no attempt thus far to discuss or theorise mockumentary comedy at a general level, though Jason Middleton (2002, 2014) and Paul Ward (2005) have made attempts in relation to the straight documentary. Instead, scholarship has largely remained focused on the mockumentary's reflexive relationship with documentary. Miller suggests that within all discussion of the mockumentary there 'lies a key, much-agreed point: the mockumentary owes its lifeblood to the documentary form which it references' (2009a: 4), and across what is still a relatively underdeveloped body of literature there is a strong sense that the most productive critical approach is through an investigation of this relationship.

This view is articulated most clearly by Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, who note in their introduction to the edited collection *F is For Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (published as part of the University of Minnesota Press's Visible Evidence series on documentary filmmaking) that

> [a]lthough a significant subset of 'real' documentaries certainly can and do self-reference their artifice, as well as the deceptions that can and do organize the moral and social, this revelatory action is the *definitive* project of the fake documentary. (2006: 2)

The use of the word 'definitive' suggests that a deconstructive critique of the documentary genre is the ultimate and primary aim of any mockumentary. It follows, then, that comic instances of the form which do not explicitly attempt this are unworthy of sustained attention:

> Although we enjoy a good laugh as much as anyone does, the essays collected here focus primarily upon these more serious uses of the fake documentary format, ones that most self-consciously and directly engage with history, identity, and truth in a political and formal project that links and unlinks power to the act of recording the visible world and to the documentary record produced. (Ibid.: 4–5)

I disagree that this is the 'definitive' project of the mockumentary and aims to take almost the exact opposite approach to corpus selection as Juhasz and Lerner, focusing on those popular, comedic examples of the form with the understanding that they can also tell us fundamentally insightful things about the world and about factual media.

Roscoe and Hight's groundbreaking 2001 book *Faking It: Mockdocumentary and the Subversion of Factuality* remains the most significant of the documentary-focused approaches. In it, the authors construct a schema to categorise mockumentary texts based on the level of reflexivity they show towards the documentary form. Three degrees of reflexivity are suggested: parody (degree one) which is only '*inherently* reflexive' (2001: 68); critique (degree two); and deconstruction (degree three), where the intention 'is to engage in a sustained critique of the set of assumptions and expectations which support the classic modes of documentary' (2001: 72).

The identification of such tendencies follows the lines of analysis frequently employed within documentary scholarship, and particularly the work of Bill Nichols, whose six modes of documentary—poetic, expository, observational, interactive, reflexive and performative (Nichols 2001: 99–138)—are well established. Although the longevity of this framework attests to its usefulness, it has resulted in Nichols's categories being used, as Stella Bruzzi puts it, 'as if they are not one way of looking at documentary history and production, but *the* way' (2006: 3). I mention such concerns here, because Roscoe and Hight's analysis of the mockumentary runs the risk of following documentary theory down a similar path. The authors do stress that their schema is designed to 'demonstrate the complexity and diversity of this growing screen form' (2001: 183), and in his follow-up book Hight makes it clear that the framework was not intended to offer a

taxonomy of texts (Hight 2010: 4). However, by imposing a hierarchy on their categories, which are also explicitly defined by a single criterion—'the degree of *reflexivity* which these texts construct towards the documentary genre' (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 64)—it is assumed that all mockumentaries are primarily engaged in a project to deconstruct the representational strategies of the documentary genre, and this is simply not the case.

My call to shift criticism away from a discussion of the direct relationship between mockumentary and documentary is also an attempt to engage with current mockumentary texts which are not so stringent in their replication of documentary conventions. Gerd Bayer has argued that because the form is established, 'mockumentaries can claim their own heritage and therefore no longer feel required to signal to the audience their hybrid qualities […] [G]one is the ironic proximity to the cinematic language and style of documentary film making' (2006: 175–176). A key argument of this book is that the mockumentary is a fundamentally intertextual form and so we should also be thinking about mockumentaries in relation to one another, rather than just in relation to documentary.

The 'family tree' diagram in Fig. 1.1 takes *The Thick of It* as an illustrative example and shows a network of some, though not all, of the connections which inform my understanding of this single programme. The programme's association with other mockumentary texts is an important part in marking it out as a mockumentary. More significantly, were we merely to focus our analysis of *The Thick of It* on its direct links to documentary and non-fiction formats alone, the web of connections is much less dense and the discussion would be significantly less rich.

The result of the existing documentary-focused approach is that the most sustained analysis of the form has fallen on those texts which *do* set out to deconstruct documentary practices. I do not wish to denigrate this work here; it is necessary and important. However it has meant that the critical field is skewed in favour of a relatively small number of relatively little-seen films and television programmes. Roscoe and Hight's book was written in 2001, during the early stages of the 'mockumentary boom' of the mid-2000s. Since then, the form has continued to evolve. However, for the most part, scholarship remains anchored to Roscoe and Hight's initial work.

This is reflected in the terminology used to discuss the mockumentary. 'Mockumentary', as a term, is not universally adopted by scholars, despite being the most popular among audiences and, perhaps, the oldest, having allegedly been used in connection with Flaherty's *Man of Aran* in 1934 (Winston 1999: 73). Roscoe and Hight's preference is for

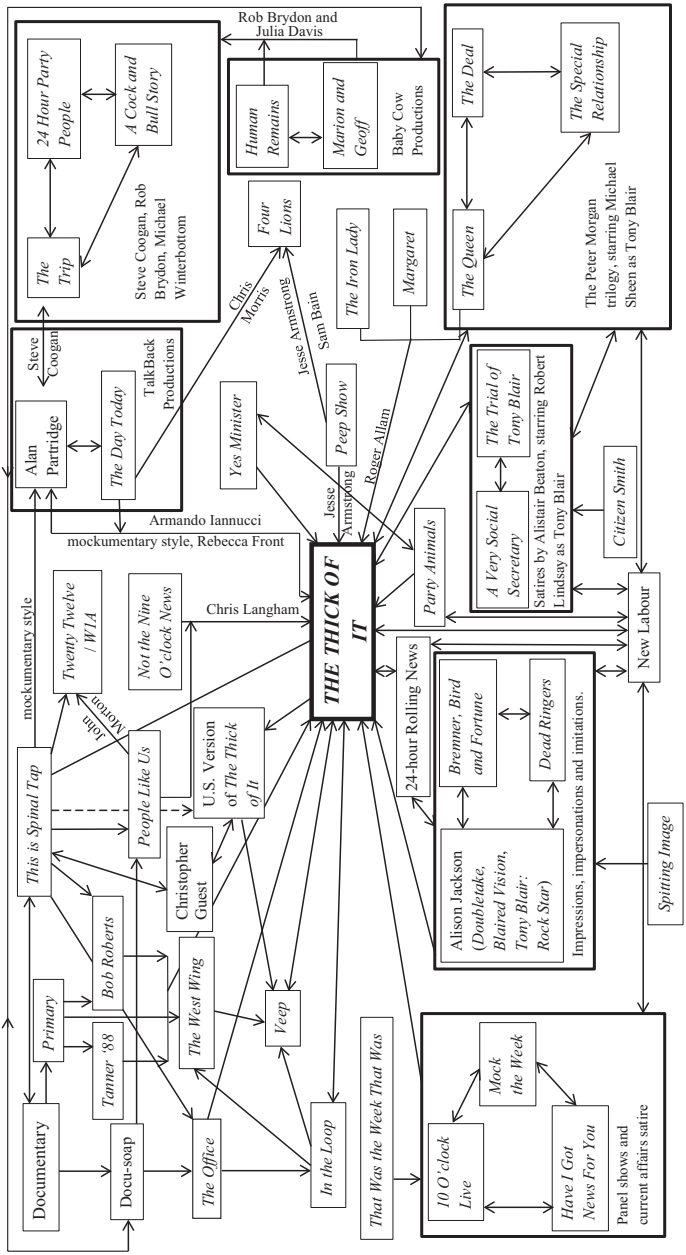

Fig. 1.1 A 'family tree' diagram of some of the textual and contextual interactions that inform my understanding of *The Thick of It*

'mock-documentary', which stresses the documentary aspects of the form, and in a statement that is symptomatic of the wider questions addressed in this book, in Hight's monograph on the television mockumentary he notes that the term mockumentary 'is often rejected' by critics

> in favour of labels such as 'pseudo-documentary' […] or 'fake documentary' […] as a means of clearly distinguishing a particular corpus of texts, or avoiding the implication that such texts' primary agenda is simply to 'mock' existing cultural forms. (2010: 8)

This distinction is also highlighted by Miller who notes that the difference between 'parody' and 'fake' in the mockumentary is 'often framed as the distinction between "mockumentary" and "fake documentary"' (Miller 2009a: 4). The suggestion that the mockumentary is a genre diverse enough to allow the use of (at least) two terms to describe different modes of mockumentary address—with choices being determined by tonal register—is compelling. However, to do so in practice would be to perpetuate the compartmentalising that has encouraged the omission of certain texts from serious critical consideration. I choose to refer to all such texts—regardless of tone—as 'mockumentaries' here because I find it more useful to be able to discuss the interrelationship and porosity of the field as a whole. In this I agree with Hight's later work, where he argues that the term 'mockumentary' is 'a label which usefully moves us away from a simplistic relationship with documentary itself' (2010: 8). In doing so it is more reflective of the scope of the whole field, and moves our understanding away from a primarily documentary-focused one. Although I admit that such a move risks prioritising the tonal qualities of the form above anything else, thus inverting, but maintaining, the very practices I critique here, there is a balance that needs redressing, and to focus on tone, and comedy in particular, when defining terms is, to my mind, no bad thing at the present time.

My own view of the mockumentary form as it currently exists—and as it is articulated in this book—echoes Hight's sentiment that '[i]t is no longer sufficient to define mockumentary largely through its reflexive potential towards documentary' (2010: 4). However, I take a different approach to Hight, who helpfully outlines a topography of television mockumentary as it was in 2010 and how it relates to other television hybrid forms. Instead, this book reacts against a rhetorical progression that I perceive to have restrained much mockumentary scholarship up to this point.

This is that as the form has developed and become more diverse, standard definitions of the mockumentary have not moved to accommodate this diversity. In particular, many recent mockumentary comedies do not adhere as strictly to documentary conventions as might once have been the case. Contrary to the existing scholarship, which might consider this ambivalent relationship to the straight documentary to be a failing of these texts, it is my contention that this has instead become a defining characteristic of the mockumentary form—and particularly mockumentary comedy—as it is in 2018. It is imperative, therefore, that comedy be reinserted to considerations of the form.

Mockumentary and Comedy

It should by now be clear that not all mockumentary texts are primarily interested in engaging critically with the documentary project, and to adopt an analytical position assuming that they are is to do an injustice to a range of rich texts which might, from this one particular viewpoint, be seen to be 'failing'. Miller notes that mockumentary texts, 'in degrees corresponding to their style, reach out and pull the cushion of certainty out from under audiences as they sit' (Miller 2009a: 5). Although this statement—as with Roscoe and Hight's 'levels of reflexivity' approach which Miller is concisely summarising—is a true one, I am inclined to suggest that not all mockumentary makers *want* to remove the cushion, and as a result do not end up pulling it very far. Indeed, a filmmaker such as Christopher Guest probably wishes for the cushion to be comfier.

Not all studies are as dismissive of the less reflexive mockumentary texts. Ward notes that within the mockumentary format as a whole, 'the comedic mock-documentary certainly predominates' (2005: 72), and Roscoe and Hight themselves recognise that

> [t]he mock-documentary form seems to be more typically used by filmmakers to parody aspects of popular culture […] than to encourage viewers to question their adherence to the assumptions and expectations associated with documentary. (2001: 160–161)

Hight's later work is also founded on an acknowledgement of the necessity of addressing the wider landscape of the television mockumentary through a critical framework where reflexivity is not the key criterion. Nevertheless there remains in Hight's work a sense that this reorientation

has come about not because of a recognition that mockumentaries have always had a wider agenda than simply critiquing the documentary genre, but because of 'the failure of mockumentary to fulfil its full subversive potential' (Hight 2010: 6). It seems that comedy is still only worth talking about because the serious mockumentaries have not lived up to their potential, rather than because it is worthy of attention in its own right.

This neglect of mockumentary comedy is perhaps symptomatic of the undeservedly lower status that comedy more generally has had to endure historically. As Andrew Horton notes, 'there is a historical bias against a close and serious consideration of comedy', and since Aristotle 'it has escaped the close schematization that the epic and tragedy have undergone in Western literary theory' (1991: 2). It is the intention of this book to demonstrate that the close analysis of mockumentary comedy is as valuable to our understanding of the form as the documentary-inflected approaches that dominate.

Given the existing focus on the reflexive nature of the mockumentary and its role in destabilising our understanding of documentary forms—or as Lizzie Francke puts it, its desire to 'fray the thin line between fact and fiction and make sceptics of us all' (2006: 340)—it is perhaps surprising that comedy has rarely figured in these discussions. Disruption is one of comedy's central tenets, and Jerry Palmer reminds us of George Orwell's claim that 'whatever is funny is subversive' (1991: 11). Horton notes that a comic work 'automatically predisposes its audience to enter a state of liminality where the everyday is turned upside down' (1991: 5). The subversive nature of comedy, therefore, has a parallel with the implied serious function of the mockumentary as it has so far been recognised. Comedy and mockumentary theory have much to say to each other, even before we begin to think about what is funny about mockumentaries or the specifics of how comedy operates *within* them.

I do not wish to dwell too long on the philosophical aspects of comedy, but it is worth noting Horton's account of the notion of comedy and 'play' as he associates it with Derrida (1991: 8–9). Of particular relevance here is the notion that comedy frequently highlights its artifice and asks the viewer to do the work of holding together the contradiction of that which is seen and that which is undone by being seen. Once again, we have a clear link to the mockumentary form, where the hidden artifice of the straight documentary is undone through its ironic reiteration as comedy.

Erving Goffman's work on 'frame analysis' (1974) is also instructive here. Goffman argues that in our everyday lives our experiences are

organised by a series of guidelines that 'frame' the way we understand social interactions. We move between 'frameworks', from, say, engaging in the world in a 'serious' way that takes the world 'at face value' (Weitz 2009: 4) to one which does not, by being 'keyed' in to a shift in the frame. As Eric Weitz suggests, 'if someone asks you, "How many English professors does it take to change a light bulb?", you know a "non-serious" exchange has been keyed because of your sociocultural experience' (2009: 4). One of the key complexities of mockumentary comedy is that the framing cues that are necessary for the transition between a 'documentary' and a 'comedy' framework are blurred.[10] We are given comic cues by the jokes within the texts themselves, but their documentary-like appearance means that mockumentary texts occupy a position which spills over the frame boundaries. As with Horton's (and Derrida's) claims, Goffman's work highlights that the game played by the mockumentary viewer is to simultaneously watch the text aware that what they are seeing is a fake, whilst playing along with its performance of documentary reality. For the audience the experience is of both comedy and not-comedy; documentary and not-documentary. This has implications for what is revealed through the mockumentary, and as Goffman argues,

> one can learn how our sense of ordinary reality is produced by examining something that is easier to become conscious of, namely, how reality is mimicked and/or how it is faked. (1974: 251)

Turning to comedy to discuss the mockumentary, therefore, opens up a number of new pathways of investigation. First of all, it turns the focus of the analysis onto comic texts which have been under-represented in scholarship to date. Even here, however, there are some texts which have been more thoroughly addressed as mockumentaries than others, hence, for example, the absence of the work of Chris Morris in this study. Morris's contribution to the mockumentary is significant, but it has received a certain amount of critical attention already, being the primary subject of books by Lucian Randall (2008) and James Leggott and Jamie Sexton (2013) and a number of articles and book chapters including those by Graham Meikle (2012), James Brassett and Alex Sutton (2017) and Craig Hight (2010, 2013b), the latter of whom specifically discusses *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye* as mockumentary news satires.

The focus on comedy also offers us an alternative model of investigation through textual analysis that focuses on the mechanics of jokes.

Detailed textual analysis has not been taken up as a major approach in any of the key overviews of the mockumentary (Roscoe and Hight 2001; Hight 2010; Doherty 2003; Miller 2009a; Bayer 2006), although it has in some analyses of individual texts (see, for example Ben Walters [2005] on *The Office*, Ethan de Seife [2007] on *This is Spinal Tap* and a number of the contributors to Miller [2012b]). However, the work of scholars such as Jerry Palmer (1987) and Noël Carroll (1991) offer ways into thinking about the details of visual comedy and how this might usefully be applied to the mockumentary form. Palmer, in particular, argues that the most important approach for comedy lies 'in the direction of an analysis of the minimum unit of comedy, the individual joke or gag, since it is here that "funniness" is located' (1987: 29). The drive to offer a detailed account of individual moments, and their position within the wider scheme of the entire text, is thus incompatible with the dominant taxonomic approach so far employed by the major studies of the mockumentary form, which tend to look at the general, rather than the specific.

Detailed textual analysis offers an important approach that can unlock the mechanics of the comedy in the mockumentary text. However, since in the mockumentary much of the comedy is directly related to the interplay of fiction and fabricated documentary style, such an approach can also serve to explore the reflexive function of the mockumentary, even when its primary aim is not reflexivity. To reiterate: in adopting elements of documentary style, many mockumentary comedies are latently reflexive, though reflexivity and critique are not their primary aim. It is through detailed textual analysis of the jokes that we can see: (a) what is funny about mockumentary comedy; (b) how those jokes are also reflexive and disruptive of our understanding of documentary conventions; and (c) how this reflexivity also tells us something about the subject of the mockumentary parody (whether that be rock stars, politicians or dog show contestants). Examining comedy, then, can add to the existing work on reflexivity but from a different perspective.

A single example should serve to demonstrate the merit of this approach as it pertains to the mockumentary. It comes from the opening of Stanley Kubrick's black comedy *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), which is not in totality a mockumentary, as much of the film is shot in a conventionally dramatic style (by which I mean it follows the conventions of the classical Hollywood style as outlined by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson [1988]). However, in certain sequences Kubrick opts for an aesthetic that *is* deliberately documentary-like, something that was recognised by contemporary

reviewers. Bryan Forbes, for example, compared the combat sequences to '[Robert] Capa's monumental coverage of the Spanish Civil War', and suggested that '[t]he footage shot inside the nuclear bomber in flight has the ghastly urgency and reality of the television camera at the scene of a disaster' (1964: 26).

What Forbes does not comment on, however, is that it is precisely in these sequences' juxtaposition with the more traditionally dramatic scenes that surround them that they—and the film as a whole—gain much of their impact. The camera rocks in response to nearby explosions, and the hand-held footage in the confined space of the bomber *is* similar in style and movement to observational documentary footage. However, there is also a tonal conflict at work. The apocalypse-causing B-52 bomber is introduced in the opening moments of the film, through a (deliberately?) unconvincing model shot, over which 'voice of God' narration details the US nuclear defence capabilities and emphasises the precarious peace held ironically in the balance by competing doomsday machines. This scene is already darkly comic in tone because of the absurd suggestion that America's nuclear prowess is dependent on a small fleet of model aeroplanes, flying in an unnatural way against a false background. Matters are exacerbated once we are relocated inside the plane, and the sober, yet listing, observational documentary-style camera picks out the pilot, his deeply attentive face glistening with sweat. However, a seemingly ad hoc, hand-held, backwards tracking shot reveals that his attention is not directed towards flying the plane as the narration and visual style have cued us into surmising, but studying a *Playboy* centrefold.

In its essence, the gag operates as a conventional example of what Carroll calls a 'switch image' sight gag, where 'the image is given to the audience under one interpretation, which is subverted with the addition of subsequent information' (1991: 33). However, this particular gag draws extra power from the manner in which this 'addition of subsequent information' is articulated through the mockumentary style, and the additional meaning that is conveyed through this choice. In the space of a few seconds, Kubrick outlines the gravity of the task that these bombers have to perform through the sombre narration of factual details and the affectation of documentary's visual conventions, before undermining this seriousness by filling the sober documentary image with absurd subject matter; in *Strangelove* it matters that the absurdities looks like documentary. The terrifying reality returns when the crew are alerted to the arrival of their mission codes by a loud beeping sound. Ironically, this return to tonal sobriety is accompanied by a breakdown of the documentary

aesthetic and the camera performs a pre-emptive crash-zoom into the revolving numbers as they arrive on the instrument panel. The shot is perfectly steady and in focus, and therefore unlike the reactive zooms that might be found in an observational documentary.

This clash of the observational documentary style with the comic content sets the tone of the film and is central to establishing what Gerald Mast calls a 'comic climate' (1973: 12). For Mast, the difference between comedy and drama 'depends entirely on whether the film creates a comic "climate" in the interest of arousing laughter or a non-comic one in the interest of arousing suspense, excitement, and expectation' (1973: 8). As a concept, 'comic climate' is linked to tone, and this moment in *Strangelove* is complex because two separate, but linked, things are occurring. On the one hand a complex tonal register is being established, which veers between the highly comic (the *Playboy* sight gag) and the highly serious (the arrival of the nuclear attack codes). This is supplemented by the interplay of documentary and non-documentary shooting styles in a way that inverts our expectations: the documentary is used for comedy, the non-documentary for the serious. This mockumentary gag, then, becomes a template of the wider mechanics of the film and of the way in which viewers are invited to experience the film's off-kilter comedy and understand its political message.

The *Playboy* joke might initially appear frivolous, but the conflict of style, tone and content ground the absurdity of the crew's behaviour in reality and turn this into a moment of incisive comic irony. When we consider the scenario outlined to us by the introductory narration—that these men are flying around virtually aimlessly, in planes that are constantly airborne, and which will probably never be called in to service—passing the time through such inane activities is entirely realistic. It is the realisation that these ostensibly absurd images could be an accurate reflection of genuine nuclear bomb-wielding airmen that gives the sequence its potency. One strand of *Strangelove*'s comedy, therefore, comes from the serious undertones being communicated in the most humorous way through the momentary adoption of the mockumentary form.

As this example demonstrates, the analysis of a single mockumentary sequence offers an avenue of investigation for discussing both the specific individual joke and questions of how comedy and tone operate across *Dr. Strangelove* as a whole. We can see that the mockumentary plays a key role in the construction and intensity of the 'switch image' *Playboy* gag. However, the wider implications that this joke has on the meaning of the film are embedded within the joke's aesthetic qualities, and a key part of

the film's satire and the blackness of its humour stems from its closeness to the realities of nuclear war, and by the articulation of this closeness through the affectation of documentary style.

Mockumentary and Performance

In the mockumentary, then, the mechanics of many of the jokes are tied to their performance of documentary style. The *Playboy* gag in *Strangelove* would be funny if the sequence were shot in a more conventional way, but it is funnier because the audience's views of how documentary is *supposed* to function are also in play (and the wider meanings articulated above are to an extent dependent on this use of style). Performance is thus a key aspect of mockumentary comedy, and again we can see useful critical approaches from comedy studies that might help unpick questions of performance and performativity in both the mock- and documentary forms.

Aspects of performance and physicality are at the heart of most visually comic forms and are key components of the work of the mime, stand-up comedian, clown and sitcom performer. Henry Jenkins and Kristine Bunovska Karnick explore the distinction between acting and performance, noting that the former may refer to 'the task of constructing characterization' (1995: 150), while the latter is a more expansive term which includes other aspects of showmanship beyond acting such as dance, magic or acrobatics. This has implications for the relationship between performance and narrative and Jenkins and Karnick argue that discussing acting 'pulls us towards a closer consideration of narrative construction and character development', whereas writing about performance 'often focuses on the ways that performance excess or spectacle disrupts or escapes the demands for narrative causality or character psychology' (1995: 150).

As a fundamentally performative mode, a key driver of comedy is the presence of performance elements that draw attention to themselves outside of the narrative bounds of the text. There is, then, a complex interplay between the audience's engagement with the diegesis and their experience of the comic performance, which demands attention be paid to it. The same is true across all visually comic forms and Brett Mills's work on the television sitcom argues that 'sitcom acting is a style which foregrounds its very performativity' and that there is a necessary tension 'between the coherence of the character which is being acted and the person who is acting it' in order for 'the performance to be read as comic in the first place' (Mills 2005: 83).

Comic forms make a show of their performative elements. However the opposite is usually the case with documentary. Thomas Waugh has noted that 'documentary film, in everyday commonsense parlance, implies the absence of elements of performance, acting, staging, direction, and so forth, criteria that presumably distinguishes the documentary form from the narrative fiction film' (2011: 75). This is particularly true of observational documentary, perhaps the most distinctive documentary mode, which 'stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker' (Nichols 1991: 38), who is supposedly engaged in 'the observing, recording, and presenting of reality without controlling, staging and reorganizing it' (Issari and Paul 1979: 13). The supposition that the filmmakers are effectively invisible is tangibly (though misleadingly) encoded into the image, so that observational documentary has the appearance of being the least performative of documentary modes.

The paradox, of course, is that observational documentary—as with all documentary forms—is in fact highly performative and Brian Winston has argued that it actually 'hides its processes as much, if not more, than does Hollywood' (1993: 50). In recent years a great deal of work has addressed the subject of documentary performance (see for example Beattie [2008], Bruzzi [2006], Marquis [2013] and Saunders [2010]). This includes Waugh, who states that the common-sense notion of how documentary functions is a naïve one, and that '[d]ocumentary performers "act" in much the same way as their dramatic counterparts' (2011: 75). Elizabeth Marquis argues that it is not the case that all documentaries 'involve the same "level" of performance' and posits a spectrum with 'the apparently spontaneous actions of individuals captured in private by a hidden camera' at one end, with examples of documentary 'wherein individuals consciously enact and present roles outside of their own identities to the camera' at the other (2013: 46). Bruzzi, meanwhile, argues that the presence of the observational documentary camera crew creates a fundamentally artificial situation and that '[t]he core of direct cinema films is the encounter before the camera, the moment when the filmmaking process disrupts and intrudes upon the reality of the world it is documenting' (2006: 78). Such documentaries are, therefore, *about* their subject's performative negotiation of this scenario.

This has clear links to Goffman's work in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and Judith Butler's work on the construction of gender. Goffman offers a definition of performance as 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence

before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers' (1959: 32). Butler's arguments are wider in scope and suggest that self-performance does not require the presence of others as witnesses. Butler argues that our public identities are composed of repeated 'acts, gestures, and desire[s]', produced '*on the surface* of the body' but which suggest 'an internal core or substance' (Butler 1990: 136). For Butler, '[s]uch acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative*', and like the 'false signifiers of reality' of documentary, 'the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means' (ibid.). When viewed in these terms, observational documentary can be seen to reveal, at the moment of intrusion, the performance of self that comes into being when an individual is placed in one particular unusual situation: the encounter with the camera. Yet this is precisely the aspect of the filmmaking process that documentary filmmakers wish to hide.

Observational documentary is thus actually highly performative and this is true even—perhaps especially—if that relationship manifests itself as a performance which affects ignorance of the camera's presence. For Waugh, observational documentary is engaged in a highly structured process by which it 'disavows and hides its performance components through such conventions as not looking at the camera' (2011: 79). The process of 'acting naturally', then, is itself a performance and Waugh argues that '[w]hen subjects perform "not looking at the camera"', they are engaged in a representational process that relies on performance (2011: 75–76). Performance is thus an important aspect of all documentaries, even those which appear on the surface to have the least to offer in terms of performativity.

Mockumentary is a fascinating object of study because it holds in tension the apparent contradiction that exists between documentary's tendency to hide performative elements and comedy's tendency to emphasise them. As a comic mode, performance is a key, visible, element of any comic mockumentary film or television programme. By playing on the interface between the fundamentally different registers of documentary and comic performance, the mockumentary makes visible—through parodic imitation and inversion—the performances that underpin, but are often hidden by the straight documentary. The comic mockumentary uses modes of self-conscious comic performance to (re-)perform documentary conventions at the level of acting and aesthetics and in doing so makes the performative aspects of documentary acting and style visible. Far from

being frivolous exercises in escapism that are only good for 'a good laugh', mockumentary comedies are complex texts that ask questions of documentary performance through comedy.

We can begin to see how approaching the mockumentary from the perspective of comedy makes visible new avenues through which the mode can be seen to be critiquing the straight documentary. It should be reiterated that comic performance in mockumentary comedy is first and foremost about the creation of comedy and generating amusement for the audience. However, in its engagement with the performative aspects of documentary it has a secondary function which *is* reflexive. When we laugh at a mockumentary comedy, the laughter and the reflexivity come from the same place: the undermining of documentary discourse (its style, its performance modes, its ontological status) through its reformulation as a comic re-performance, which makes visible the devices that structure that discourse, which in turn are also usually erased by that structure.

Structure

Given that all mockumentaries, comic or otherwise, are engaged in a process of performing documentary conventions to some extent, it is perhaps unsurprising that performance and performativity are also frequently the main subjects of comic mockumentary texts. Talent shows, concerts, contests, beauty pageants and amateur dramatic productions are just some of the performance-based subjects given a mockumentary spin. However, two topics that mockumentary comedy has returned to repeatedly for its source material are pop music and politics.

These are, of course, both areas that involve significant performative elements by the public figures who populate these worlds. Bruzzi has noted that 'the politician is necessarily performative' (2006: 184) and the same is true of the rock star. Both curate their personas through a process of public self-performance and there is always a sense—whether this is the case or not—of a distinction between their public and private selves. One of the major strands of comedy found throughout comic mockumentary texts is a fascination with the boundaries between this public and private self. As Thompson argues, the adoption of a documentary aesthetic implies that what we are seeing is in some ways 'telling the "truth"' about its subject and that it is 'this claiming of the real through documentary style that perhaps has the longest tradition in television production' (2007: 67). Mockumentary comedy's investigation of the private or 'backstage' spaces

of the rock star and politician mirrors a common hook of the observational documentary, but here the hidden performances of genuine public figures are reconfigured into a comic mode. This works to produce individual moments of comedy that accrue across an entire text to offer a parodic reading of the hidden performances by public figures. Thus, comic performance in the mockumentary makes visible the performances that underpin the real world public figures that are the targets of the parody.

This book is divided into two sections which explore mockumentary representations of the rock star and the politician, respectively. The first three chapters take the rock star as their subject and approach the mechanics of comedy in the mockumentary from three different perspectives. In Chap. 2, the question of self-performance is addressed in an analysis of *A Hard Day's Night* and the direct cinema documentary *What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A.* (1964), originally made for *World in Action* (1963–1998). Here, I suggest that the mockumentary reworks aspects of the documentary in a comic mode in an attempt to provide a space for The Beatles to work through—and temporarily escape from—the pressures of fame. It is also argued that the presumed boundaries between real and fake are made porous through the comic performances that populate both films and result in an ironic situation where it is the mockumentary that seems to capture the band in a more natural state than the documentary.

This line of investigation is extended in Chap. 3. Here I argue that *This is Spinal Tap* employs a dense parody to expose the performative nature of genuine rock stars. In doing so, it complicates our understanding of Spinal Tap's ontological status, with the fictional band's extra-diegetic existence further complicating definitions of what we consider to be real and fake.

The final chapter in Part I focuses on the work of Christopher Guest, particularly the film *A Mighty Wind*. Here, I suggest that Guest's work plays on familiarity and repetition, particularly in relation to other mockumentaries, and that, significantly, the form has established a recognisable visual style that is no longer directly aligned to documentary modes of representation.

Part II uses a specific case study, the political mockumentary on television, to further explore the aspects of performance and image creation highlighted in Part I. Chapter 5 focuses on the ways in which *The Thick of It* and the work of satirical photographer and programme maker Alison Jackson have engaged with the New Labour era of British politics. The chapter looks to interrogate how spin and image manipulation, aspects key to the public success of New Labour, are explored by the mockumentary form.

The final chapter brings together a number of strands relating to the performance of authenticity that run throughout the book. The American television series *Tanner '88* and *Veep* both explore the comic implications of the construction and projection of an authentic political persona through a mockumentary form that is itself performing a version of authenticity. These series are examined within the context of post-truth politics where policy is driven not by empirical evidence but emotion.

Much of the comedy found in these texts does have a latent reflexivity embedded within it, particularly in the ironic use of performance, which often serves to highlight the performative nature of the documentary form itself. Ironically then, in attempting to remove the burden of reflexivity from these texts, many of the examples discussed here have shown themselves to be far more reflexive, through their comedy, than previous criticism has acknowledged. It just happens to be the case that this reflexivity is not the main project of these texts. Since much work on the mockumentary has lauded the serious and the clever and overlooked the comic, this book demonstrates that one need not preclude the other. Whilst there is indeed, to quote Spinal Tap's David St Hubbins (Michael McKean), 'a fine line between stupid and clever', the comic mockumentary does not necessarily fall on the wrong side of that line.

Notes

1. Letter from Leonard Miall to David Wheeler, 5 April 1957, BBC WAC T32/1,218/1: '*Panorama*: tx.57.04'.
2. 'Telegrams to Mr. Richard Dimbleby relating to remarks about spaghetti in *Panorama*—2.4.57', ibid.
3. Surprisingly, Craig Hight does not make a single mention of *The Thick of It* in his book-length study of the television mockumentary. Roscoe and Hight's book was published before the show was first broadcast.
4. *I'm Alan Partridge* is the first show to exhibit writer and producer Armando Iannucci's mockumentary style which he claims (in the 2009 documentary *This is Spinal Tap: Up to 11*) is directly influenced by the mockumentary style of *Spinal Tap*. Partridge (Steve Coogan) himself, in the in-character commentary on the DVD release of *I'm Alan Partridge*, suggests that the show is not a documentary but a re-enactment of things that really happened to him, filmed in a documentary style (Partridge 2002).
5. The omission of the apostrophe in the title of *Dont Look Back* is deliberate. As Dave Saunders argues, it 'exhibits a typically counter-cultural disregard for formalised language' (2007: 59) and Pennebaker himself has suggested

that it was an attempt to 'simplify the language' (Sounes 2002: 208) in line with the experimental nature of direct cinema documentary filmmaking. This has also become the accepted way of referring to the film in academic work. See for example Saunders (2010) and Beattie (2016).

6. For more on *The War Game*'s suppression, see Garnham (1972), Tracey (1982), Cook and Murphy (2000), Murphy (2003) and Chapman (2006).
7. It also won the 1966 Academy Award for Best Documentary which poses its own set of questions.
8. To these we could also add episodes of *C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigation* (2005–2015), *The Simpsons* (1989–) and *The West Wing* (1999–2006) among many others.
9. Given Linehan's statement, it is ironic that the initial treatment of the sitcom *Father Ted*, written in 1990, was for a one-off mockumentary comedy. In *Small, Far Away: The World of Father Ted*, a 2011 documentary on the making of the show, Declan Lowney, one of its directors, acknowledged that it was a script that 'was never going to be commissioned by anybody', perhaps signalling that in hindsight 1990 was slightly too early for a mainstream mockumentary project. In the end, comedy producer Geoffrey Perkins suggested it be turned into a standard sitcom.
10. For an account of how this works in practice, see Morson's (1979) work on framing in Orson Welles's 'War of the Worlds' broadcast.

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PART I

Music

CHAPTER 2

Acting Naturally: Performing The Beatles

As I argued in Chap. 1, performance is an important aspect of all documentaries, even those—such as the observational documentary mode—which appear to have the least to offer in terms of performativity. This chapter examines questions of performance and image creation as they pertain to mockumentary comedy by analysing The Beatles' film *A Hard Day's Night* (1964). The film hinges on the performativity of its stars—George Harrison, John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr—and the interplay of various levels of performance, which have both comic and reflexive effects. In particular, the mockumentary form is used by the band members as a means of shaping their individual and collective public personas which they inhabit and send-up throughout the film. These personas are situated in proximity to, but also at an ironic distance from, the realities and demands of their everyday lives in the public eye.

It is significant, therefore, that *A Hard Day's Night* is deliberately documentary-like, and it takes its cues most clearly from the 1964 direct cinema documentary *What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A.*, Albert and David Maysles' account of the group's first tour of America, made one month before *A Hard Day's Night* began shooting.[1] This aesthetic choice has two implications for *A Hard Day's Night*. First, an added level of performance is evident, over and above that apparent in the straight documentary. This is not just a question of self-performance for Richard Lester's cameras, but a conscious act of caricaturing the familiar, pre-existing media performances already being formed by the individual band

R. Wallace, *Mockumentary Comedy*, Palgrave Studies in Comedy,
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members and fixed in the public's imagination through their appearance in media texts such as *What's Happening!*

A Hard Day's Night is a fictionalisation, but has the appearance of a documentary and the band members—playing themselves—never acknowledge the camera, living up to the stereotypical view of observational documentary's claims of non-intervention. This is rarely the case in *What's Happening!* where the conventions of direct cinema are perpetually undermined by the subjects' anarchic failure to play along with the conceit of invisibility. The second major implication that the choice of a mockumentary aesthetic has for *A Hard Day's Night*, then, is that as a result of the band members' real life tendency to act up for the media cameras, a paradoxical situation emerges in which *A Hard Day's Night* frequently looks and behaves more like how an observational documentary is *supposed* to than *What's Happening!* does. This chapter examines the ways in which these aspects—which are inherently reflexive and revealing—are made visible through comedy, and in turn provide the comic impetus for many sequences, as the oscillation between the film's dual status as 'like documentary' and 'not documentary' creates a space for comic playfulness.

Establishing a Viewing Mode

A Hard Day's Night is an exaggerated 'day-in-the-life' of The Beatles, following them as they travel to London to rehearse and record a live television performance. It is located on the margins of the mockumentary form. Unlike some of the most recognisable examples—*This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), *The Office* (2001–2003) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)—there is no indication that there is actually a camera crew present, even if much of the film looks like it has been shot in a similar way to direct cinema. In this respect it looks forward to later examples of the mockumentary form, such as *The Thick of It* (2005–2012), *Modern Family* (2009–) and some aspects of Christopher Guest's work, which also dispense with the pretence of the diegetic camera crew, as is discussed elsewhere in this book.

There are also several sequences, particularly during the opening train journey, which complicate a straightforward understanding of the film as a mockumentary. The first musical number, a performance of the song 'I Should Have Known Better', is the most obvious example. It takes place in the luggage compartment of a London-bound train, where Paul's nuisance grandfather (Wilfred Brambell) has been sequestered. Seated among a hanging bicycle, some caged chickens, a dog and their cased

instruments, the band members play a game of cards to pass the time, and the opening hand is accompanied by the first verse of the song. Even though the music appears to be non-diegetic at this point, Paul can be seen mouthing along. The rapid transition from the card game to the full musical performance occurs through a series of medium close-ups of John Lennon. In the first shot, John is framed in profile in the foreground, shielding his cards close to his mouth. Following a cutaway to the ad hoc card table we return to an identically composed shot of John, but the cards have been replaced by a harmonica. The wide-shot which follows reveals that the other players have also exchanged their cards for instruments.

Stephen Glynn suggests that 'the presentation of "I Should Have Known Better" both is and is not diegetic' and acts 'as a vital signpost to the duality rampant in *A Hard Day's Night*' (2005: 68). The presence of the cased instruments during the lead up to the song adds legitimacy to the performance, and it is conceivable that the band got bored of playing cards and decided to have a run-through of the song. However, the suggestion that the performance is somehow an imagination, paralleled with the card game, is also created through the editing. The opening of the song does not appear to have any source, yet several Beatles acknowledge its presence before they can be seen playing it. The movement from the card game to the performance of 'I Should Have Known Better' is emblematic of the musical genre's movement between different plains of reality, and the transition is an example of what Rick Altman calls an audio dissolve (1989: 62–65). In this instance the audio track moves fluidly between two distinct registers: that representing the real world of the card game (and mostly containing diegetic sound); and that representing the utopian—to recall Richard Dyer (1981)—or idealised world (containing a hybrid of diegetic and non-diegetic sound), with the image following shortly thereafter.

This comparison to the musical is apt as the opening of the film includes a number of moments designed to signal to its audience that the film—like the fantastical numbers of the integrated musical film—will not always follow conventional rules of realist film-making, nor even the laws of time, space or physics. A scene in which the band mock class and generational distinctions and taunt a middle-class commuter, by cheekily asking for their metaphorical ball back, is just one example. Here the physical impossibility of the 'boys' appearing without warning outside the window of a moving train is a moment of comic absurdity, 'topped' by George's unexplained acquisition of the bicycle that he is riding. Both this and the

'I Should Have Known Better' sequence are key to suggesting a viewing strategy for the film, with the physical breach of the train's walls foreshadowing a scene much later in the film where John performs an impossible disappearing act from a bathtub.

The 'I Should Have Known Better' sequence establishes the tone of the film and suggests a specific viewing mode. Ironically, this mixture of modes of address is, at a formal level, more like documentary—which is free to mix material acquired from different sources—than films made in line with classical Hollywood continuity systems, which traditionally strive to maintain realism. However, at the same time Roland Reiter notes that these 'short surreal sequences' ensure that 'the viewer is constantly reminded that *A Hard Day's Night* is actually a fictional movie' (2008: 49). From the outset, we are asked not to confuse *A Hard Day's Night* with a documentary, but instead to understand its attempt to appear like one, and the explicit signalling of fictionality that takes place towards the start of *A Hard Day's Night* is a typical feature of the comic mockumentary in general, though rarely is it achieved in such a stylish and inventive way. The playfulness of these complicating moments—the band sneering in from outside of a moving train; the movement from playing cards to playing a song—are essential to suggesting that we are to understand the film as a heavily skewed version of (the already heavily skewed) reality of Beatlemania.

However, these absurd disruptions are only experienced *as* disruptive because they contrast with the surrounding direct cinema-esque style which is also evident from the start. This documentary-like aesthetic was an intentional stylistic choice. Discovering that EMI had failed to cover film soundtracks in their contract with the band, United Artists conceived 'a low-budget exploitation movie to milk the latest brief musical craze for all it was worth' (Glynn 2005: 9). As Glynn notes, the film's small budget of £200,000 (ibid.: 15) suited a 'fictionalised documentary of the group's real-life relationship to fame', and 'called for black-and-white photography to replicate the footage flooding television screens, newspapers and magazines' (ibid.: 18). The opening shot, in which George and Ringo take a tumble whilst attempting to escape a screaming mob of youngsters, is signalled as unplanned by Lennon's spontaneous and near-hysterical laughter. The first shot on the train, of the waving crowds on the platform—camera flashes flaring—and filmed through the gaps between the silhouetted band members, stylistically looks like documentary footage, and the brief scene in the car as the band leave the station (Fig. 2.1) *is* genuine documentary footage, spontaneously filmed by Lester on the way

Fig. 2.1 Genuine documentary shooting in the back of a car in *A Hard Day's Night*

home from a day's filming, which explains Lennon and McCartney's noticeably different attire to the surrounding scenes (ibid.: 25–26). This intertwining of the real and the fake, with no signposting or separation, means that the aesthetic is more complicated than it might at first seem; at times we might even read *documentary* footage as fiction.

The oscillation between these competing registers is key to establishing the film's 'comic climate' (Mast 1973: 9–13). Gerald Mast describes the comic climate as the combination of textual cues that guide the audience's response to the text, in particular signalling that what they are watching is comedy, and is therefore governed by a different set of rules to other dramatic forms. The opening of *A Hard Day's Night* is significant then—as it is in all mockumentary comedy—because it constructs a comic climate which works across two competing and contradictory aesthetic and tonal terrains: that of fictional comedy and that of documentary. The film establishes a visual aesthetic that is in direct opposition to the comic, even absurd, content. This play between registers is a vital part of the film's tone and is instructive as to the workings of mockumentary comedy more generally.

Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik's work on comic verisimilitude (1990: 94) can help us to navigate this potential paradox. They reiterate that all comedy is transgressive, particularly of 'decorum and verisimilitude' (ibid.: 86), the latter of which they equate with 'what is probable or likely' (ibid.: 84). Significantly, Neale and Krutnik argue that fictional texts exhibit different levels of verisimilitude which operate along generic

and aesthetic lines. Romantic comedies, musicals and horror films, for instance, all inhabit and express different 'regimes of verisimilitude' (ibid.: 91) in relation to which the audience is able to orientate themselves. For Neale and Krutnik, moments of comic surprise are frequently the result of 'paradigmatic substitution' (ibid.: 88), where one mode of verisimilitude is displaced by another. This is what causes the comic surprise we experience when The Beatles appear outside of the train carriage: two different modes of verisimilitude are operating in contradiction.

The paradox for the comic mockumentary is founded on the fact that the verisimilitudinous planes of documentary and comedy appear fundamentally at odds with one another. However, Neale and Krutnik remind us that 'comedy and the comic have their own—generic—regimes of verisimilitude' and that because comic forms are founded on surprising transgressions, they are also where 'we expect the unexpected' (1990: 91). Comedies, then, are paradoxical because audiences understand that comedy is the 'appropriate site for the inappropriate' (ibid.). This is, of course, the exact opposite of the regime of verisimilitude that we expect from the documentary, which, because it represents the real world around us, we expect to abide by the rules of what is likely.

Of course, *A Hard Day's Night* is *not* a documentary, so its regime of verisimilitude is not the same as a genuine documentary, but its visual style is designed to encourage such an experience. As a result, the gulf between what we expect (that at the very least the laws of physics will be obeyed) and what we get (The Beatles impossibly appearing outside a moving train) is greater because the paradigms of verisimilitude that are being overlaid (documentary verisimilitude is replaced by comic verisimilitude) are at some distance from one another, and so the comic surprise is greater. This is key to establishing *A Hard Day's Night*'s comic climate as an oscillation—and co-existence—of documentary and comedic regimes of verisimilitude, and thus between documentary and comedic modes of viewing.

A Hard Day's Night's camera style always serves the realist aspects of the film, suggesting a documentary-like examination of The Beatles' lifestyle, even if the actual images and much of the editing do not always do likewise. The opening sequence in the train compartment, for instance, is edited at high speed to enhance the rapid-fire comic delivery of the band members' one-liners, though as I will argue in Chap. 6 this is in itself a characteristic of many mockumentaries. However, as Bob Neaverson suggests, the

> use of real locations, hand-held sequences and naturalistic lighting frequently imbue the action with a sense of overpowering actuality which, at times, becomes so stylistically similar to documentary or newsreel footage that it becomes impossible to differentiate fact from fiction. (1997: 16)

To this end the 'I Should Have Known Better' sequence is filmed using hand-held cameras, shooting voyeuristically through the bars in the luggage cage, and carries the characteristic imperfections and textural qualities of direct cinema. Many of the crowd sequences 'provided suitable raw material for the expedient Lester' (Glynn 2013: 84) and are straightforwardly documentary, and the 'day-in-the-life' structure employed by the film follows what Stephen Mamber (1972) has called the 'crisis structure' of direct cinema documentaries in that it covers a single incident for a short space of time, with narrative closure being obtained from an ending in which the musicians make a vehicular exit following a concert; a situation that mirrors a number of genuine direct cinema music films such as *What's Happening!*, *Dont Look Back* (1967) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970).[2]

This documentary aspect complicates *A Hard Day's Night*'s relationship to the reality of The Beatles during this period and acts as a historical document of the rise of Beatlemania and Swinging London. As Alexander Walker suggests, Richard Lester

> saw the chance […] to show the Beatles against the contemporary social revolution in art, architecture, clothes, language, and class which they had in part helped create. (1974: 236)

Lester himself recalls that he was aware that The Beatles 'were producing an effect on the entire population of Britain […] which badly needed to be documented' (ibid.), and Neil Sinyard stresses that the film

> [catches] that moment in time with such intensity that [it becomes] a lasting document on the era, contributing to its mythology whilst simultaneously submitting it to an ironical critical scrutiny. (1985: 18)

A Hard Day's Night was made in the 'now' of Beatlemania, and in this sense shares the immediacy of direct cinema's 'present-tense' engagement with its subject: the film is about Beatlemania as much as it is about The Beatles. This is in contrast to many other mockumentaries, which tend to operate with some level of temporal and critical distance. *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash* (1978), for example, parodied The Beatles' narrative eight years after their break-up.

Negotiating Success 1: Parodying Situation

The scale of The Beatles' success in early 1964 was unprecedented. In January, they were selling 10,000 copies of the 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' single per hour in New York City. Their 9 February appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948–1971) was watched by 73 million people, the largest television audience recorded up to that point, and in April Beatles' singles held twelve of the top 100 places on the *Billboard* chart, including numbers 1–5 (Lewisohn 1996: 136–138). Even though it is fictional, then, *A Hard Day's Night* serves a documentary function, reflecting the period of intense activity, just as it fulfilled the desires of a contemporary international audience desperate for a peek into The Beatles' world.

Lennon, McCartney, Harrison and Starr appear to be playing themselves in very similar circumstances to their real-life counterparts and Jesse Schlotterbeck (2016) goes so far as to describe the film as a biopic. Indeed, the film ironically and humorously comments on the phenomena of Beatlemania by 'pitchforking the Beatles into situations they had met many times—then standing back and viewing them that little bit obliquely or oddly' (Walker 1974: 239). We see comic renderings of a number of scenarios which had already become routine for the band: running from screaming fans; attending press conferences; taking stressful train and car journeys; and answering mountainous piles of fan-mail. As an example of how these comic transformations work, one only needs to look at a joke which recurs throughout the film in which the band members attempt to flee their fans, find their passage blocked and employ an unorthodox (and humorous) manner of escape. The first instance of this occurs at the conclusion of the opening train sequence. The band have been instructed to make a dash from the train to the 'big car that's waiting'. The only trouble is that between them and the car are parked an impenetrable line of taxis. In an example of what Noël Carroll calls a 'solution gag'—where a comic reversal based on 'practical ingenuity' (1991: 37) occurs which is unanticipated by the audience—the band members reach their intended vehicle by going *through*, rather than around, the taxis. Our first instinct is that they have abandoned their original plans in order to take advantage of the more accessible vehicles. However, this assumption is overturned when upon entering the first taxi that they come to, they then leave it through the opposite set of doors and reach the safety of their 'big car' via the mechanisms of the sight gag. This gag is reworked later in the film as the band moves between a car and the theatre. In this instance the taxis are replaced

by a road worker's canvas hut. The musicians enter the hut through the front flap, then leave through the back, but only after carrying the entire structure with them to the theatre door, leaving a bemused road worker exposed to the elements.

In conception, this solution gag is lifted almost verbatim from Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931) in which the foot-bound Tramp (Charlie Chaplin) finds himself incarcerated by stationary traffic and extricates himself by passing through a parked limousine. However, both of *A Hard Day's Night*'s iterations gain additional power from the dizzying documentary-like camerawork, particularly the images captured by the cameras located *inside* the two cars, which react with a frantic spontaneity to the blurry Beatle-shaped figures who clamber past.

The comedy of these sequences offers a stark contrast to the genuine scenes in which The Beatles are forced to navigate crowds in *What's Happening!* Upon returning to the Plaza Hotel after attending a photo shoot, Lennon, McCartney and Starr (Harrison was ill) find themselves trapped in their car, surrounded by fans and mounted police. Although the driver does eventually manage to gain some distance on the 'mob', there is visible tension and a sense of real urgency in the car as they arrive at the hotel, with Lennon suggesting that they 'Get in quick'.[3] In much the same way as the documentary feel of *A Hard Day's Night*'s opening sequence on the train is punctured by the comedic taunting of the middle-class commuter, in the 'fleeing through the taxis' sequence, comedy is used to overturn the hectic reality captured in the documentary. Thus the undercurrent of danger evident in *What's Happening!* is acknowledged in *A Hard Day's Night* through the presence of the pursuing mob and the barrier of taxis, but defused by the sight gag; the taxis stop being a hindrance as soon as the band members are on the other side of them, at which point they become a crowd-controlling safety barrier placed between them and their fans.

This example of comic transformation reflects a wider tension that exists across the film as a whole. On the surface, *A Hard Day's Night* appears to be a celebration of Beatlemania. However, underneath the crowd-pleasing veneer it expresses a clear desire to escape from the pressures associated with life as a Beatle, to trade a situation where something as simple as moving between a car and a hotel can be genuinely frightening with one were the same action can be experienced as light-hearted comedy.[4] That this desire is articulated most clearly in one of the phenomenon's most incendiary artefacts is ironic and *A Hard Day's Night* enables

the performers at the centre of the film to momentarily escape from the restrictions and pressures of their fame by simultaneously working within, and contributing to, the components responsible for that fame and that pressure. The mockumentary style is central to this tension. The immediacy of the observational documentary-style image gives the impression that we are getting closer to our idols, whilst fictionalisation allows the performers to distance themselves from this reality by making an ironic comment on the pitfalls of fame.

Walker recounts the experience that led producer Walter Shenson to devise the film's basic narrative. Trying to finalise the deal, Shenson found himself in a four-seater taxi en route to the recording studio, accompanied by all four Beatles and their manager Brian Epstein. 'It was […] from the physical discomfort of the overcrowded cab' that Shenson conceived the shape of the film, and it

> never lost this early, brutally simple concept of being about four boys who were in captivity, physically imprisoned by their fans, and resorting to all kinds of strategies to evade the consequences of their celebrity. (1974: 234)

This sense of entrapment is most clearly expressed by Paul's grandfather, the outsider to the group, who has been taken along to keep him out of trouble at home, who complains,

> I thought I was supposed to be getting a change of scenery, and so far I've been in a train and a room and a car and a room and a room and a room […] I'm feeling decidedly straightjacketed.

This exclamation of restlessness highlights the tedium of The Beatles' daily routine, and reflects the sense of a band trapped by its strenuous touring schedule and endless media commitments. As Glynn notes, throughout the film 'the boys are shown to have the whole world at their feet yet cannot walk the streets in safety' (2013: 87).

The sense of confinement is starkly apparent in *What's Happening!*, and one of the most surprising aspects of the documentary is how boring life appears to be for the most successful band on the planet. When not fulfilling media commitments, they are held in virtual captivity in their hotel room, unable to leave un-chaperoned due to the omnipresent crowds. The sense of relief is palpable when they finally do manage to escape to The Peppermint Lounge nightclub for an evening of dancing. Dave Saunders notes that in this sequence:

> the vibrant camerawork and montage add to a sense that the famous Beatles, intoxicated and inaudible over the music, might for a moment have forgotten their collective concern for the maintenance of a public image. They are purely having fun, away from any psychological pressure to keep up the drollery that the fans and record companies found so easily sellable. (2007: 43)

This is a moment of joyful release replicated in *A Hard Day's Night*, though the relief is stifled when they are herded back to their fan-mail. The frustration builds until the strain causes the band to make an emergency exit, both literal and figurative, as they flee down a fire escape—'We're out!' cheers Ringo—for a slapstick lark about in the freedom of a playing-field to the jangle of 'Can't Buy Me Love'; 'the "time-out" pause from serfdom that refreshes the Beatles—and to some extent the whole film' (Walker 1974: 240). However, even this is cut short by the field's groundsman, and it is in keeping with the film's critique of The Beatles' high-pressured lifestyle that following the climactic concert, the group leave London via helicopter to do it all over again at a midnight matinee in Wolverhampton.

The wearying demands of the press are the subject of particular parody in *A Hard Day's Night*'s press conference sequence. After repeatedly failing in their attempts to acquire food and liquid refreshment, the band members have to field a series of questions reminiscent of those asked at many similar events around the world. According to Walker (1974: 239), The Beatles' responses were not scripted. Instead script-writer Alun Owen devised questions for the actors to improvise answers to, as they were accustomed to in their day-to-day interactions with the press, once again blurring the line between the fictional and 'actual' Beatles. The band's constant use of humour to deal with monotonous questions about their hairstyles is taken to the extreme through their—and Lester's—use of repetition. We see George dealing with the question 'What do you call that hairstyle you're wearing?' by naming it 'Arthur'. This is followed by Ringo being asked an identical question about his shirt collar, which he answers with the over-literal reply, 'a collar', emphasising both the repetitive and inane nature of the questions. Paul answers four questions during the sequence, the first with the baffling statement, 'I'd like to keep Britain tidy', and the other three with the statement, 'no actually, we're just good friends'. We don't hear three of these questions being asked—the fourth, 'Do you often see your father', is answered with the repeated refrain—but the repetitive response suggests either that the same questions about his personal life are being

asked over and over again, or that he has found his own particular way of dealing with the press, in this case playing on the repetitive questioning by providing repetitive answers.

The press conference sequence was added to the script to take advantage of the huge success of the one held at John F. Kennedy Airport on 7 February 1964, directly following The Beatles' arrival in America, and the questions and responses are very similar (Glynn 2005: 22). At the real press conference the band members are asked several of the usual questions: 'Would you please sing something?', 'How many are bald if you have to wear those wigs?', 'Do you hope to get a haircut at all?' It is no surprise that they were beginning to feel frustrated, and John Lennon's response to the second question, 'Oh we're all bald. And deaf and dumb too', seems to be a witty, yet caustic assertion of his feelings towards the press; the band never hear anything new and never get the chance to speak about intelligent subjects.

Ultimately, writing and performing music seems to provide the most satisfying outlet for the group and they seem most comfortable when rehearsing 'And I Love Her' and 'If I Fell', playing 'I Should Have Known Better' on the train, and performing the final concert. It is also, of course, during these performances that the collapsing of the different versions of The Beatles is most dramatic, and there appears to be no tangible distinction between the 'real' Beatles and the 'performed' characters at these moments. Clearly, music acts as another form of escape. However, the film also sees the band performing to screaming audiences and although the energy conveyed in the film by the combination of band and audience is irresistible in its intensity, it is also emblematic of the frustrating live experience that would ultimately lead The Beatles to quit touring in 1966.

Negotiating Success 2: Comic Self-Performance

To counter this oppressive reality, The Beatles create an ironic distance through the performance of themselves as 'characters' and there is an interesting interplay between the opposing self-presentation of The Beatles in *A Hard Day's Night* and *What's Happening!* The documentary offers an unusual direct cinema example of a set of 'presentational documentary performances' (Waugh 2011: 76), which Thomas Waugh defines as the subject 'performing an awareness of the camera' (ibid.: 78). In much the same way as the band members disrupt press and media commitments with a sense of anarchic verbal comedy that garnered comparisons with the Marx Brothers, their attitude towards the documentary filmmakers is no

different. Their self-performances for the documentary cameras are ubiquitous and work as a near-continual comic upsetting of the observational documentary mode. In so doing, they remind us of Jonathan Romney's claim that whilst the 'backstage' space of the rock documentary might appear to be 'a space of privacy […] in which the *real being* [of the performer …] supposedly lies shielded from sight' (1995: 83), it is also the case that '[b]ackstage, particularly when the cameras are present, is no less a space of display than the stage itself' (ibid.: 86). Instead of 'acting naturally' (Waugh 2011: 75–76) for the Maysles brothers' camera, The Beatles perform comic skits and mug for the camera, puncturing observational documentary's structural framework through comic anarchy. This leads to a series of self-performances, and indeed a collective group performance, playing up The Beatles' typically anarchic attitude towards the media. As Saunders argues, this performative element 'is part of their professional lives' and 'a learned response' (2007: 41) to the media's intrusion into their lives. It also allows the band to turn the tables on the press interviewers, journalists, and indeed on the documentary filmmakers, by emptying any meaning out of their responses and actions. The media get priceless footage, but don't really gain any insight into the private world of the band. This is comic performance as self-defence.

On board the train to Washington, Harrison and Lennon act out a mock advert for Marlboro cigarettes specifically for the Maysles' camera, the stilted performance adding an extra layer of irony since we know from *A Hard Day's Night* that in reality they are much better actors than this. These moments are deliberately comic and self-referential and help to develop the collective's personas as light-hearted jokers. Harrison and Lennon draw attention to themselves *as* performers and so offer a clear barrier between performance and performer. This is, perhaps, most clearly articulated elsewhere on the train journey where Harrison and Starr don implausible disguises: Harrison appears dressed as a waiter and, in the American version of the film, Starr wears a woman's coat and fur-lined pill-box hat and clambers over train seats and down the aisle, apparently pretending to be an inept Russian spy. Harrison's skit makes it clear that his performance is primarily for the Maysles' camera when he jokingly berates an observing reporter who is blocking his path by telling him, 'You're wrecking the film here!' He then carries a tray of drink towards the documentary camera, looks directly at the lens for a brief moment before he removes the porter's hat and says, 'It's me!' as if we had not been able to work that out already. In such moments the pair work through a series

of documentary versions of the not-really-hiding-in-plain-sight joke that is repeated throughout *A Hard Day's Night*, to which I will return shortly.

Unlike Bob Dylan or The Rolling Stones, who, in *Dont Look Back* and *Gimme Shelter* respectively, are happy to collude with the filmmakers and uphold the pretence of non-intervention, The Beatles' continued interaction with the Maysles' camera in *What's Happening!* ruptures the pretence of the filmmaker's invisibility. As a result, their behaviour when dealing with the intruding camera appears simultaneously more honest and yet also more 'fake' than most observational documentaries. We know they are responding naturally, but this response is very clearly performative. It is in the car-bound sequences of *What's Happening!* and *Dont Look Back* where the different performative responses are most striking. It is inconceivable that the documentary subject would fail to notice that they were sharing the back seat of a car with a cameraperson and sound recordist. Yet this is precisely what Dylan appears to do to D.A. Pennebaker's camera on at least three occasions in *Dont Look Back*. In contrast, in *What's Happening!*, McCartney puts on a performance for the Maysles' camera, pantomiming along with a commercial for Kent cigarettes that is playing on his transistor radio. This is an overt performance. Lennon remains silent throughout this entire sequence but also refuses to ignore the camera, and frequently stares directly into the lens, as if challenging Al Maysles to a staring competition, daring the camera to look away first. Paradoxically, the massively different reactions to the camera exhibited by Dylan and The Beatles actually have very similar effects. When The Beatles acknowledge the camera, it proves that the Maysles' presence has affected their behaviour, and suggests that they are consciously performing. Conversely, Dylan's apparent failure to acknowledge a camera which must be unmissable, signals his apparent non-response *as* a performance, though the suggestion that it isn't remains implied.

In *A Hard Day's Night* The Beatles' ability to play caricatured versions of themselves frees them from this constant process of self-surveillance. Lester's camera is not a news or documentary camera, and so it is not attempting to capture those brief moments when the mask slips. This does occasionally happen in *What's Happening!*, such as when Albert Maysles' camera finds a cold and tired McCartney isolated in a corner of a boisterous train carriage on the way to Washington. Unable to will the strength to perform in his usual high-spirited manner, McCartney, cigarette in hand, and tongue lodged in his lower lip, directs a look of disdain towards the camera and says, 'I'm not in a laughing mood, even.' Instead of such

moments, Lester's camera in *A Hard Day's Night* colludes in the playful process of self-performance and self-mockery, creating a space in which the band members' individual public personas are manufactured, moulded and manipulated. This creation of an enduring set of personas is one of the film's clearest legacies.

Deconstructing the Four-Headed Monster

A Hard Day's Night goes to great lengths to separate out the four personalities of the band members, partly as a response to the real Beatles growing tired of the public being unable to tell them apart. This happens frequently in *What's Happening!* At the press conference following their arrival in America, the group are always addressed collectively, a practice that McCartney mocks during the Central Park photo-shoot sequence, affecting an American accent and mimicking the press's impersonal shouts of 'Hey Beatles! Hey Beatles!' On the train from Washington to New York, a star-struck elderly male passenger mistakes Starr for Harrison and another autograph hunter askes McCartney, 'which one are you?' This refrain is upended in a sequence included in *The First U.S. Visit* version of the film, where McCartney leans over a Miami hotel balcony to respond to a group of young women below, and shouts, 'Which one are you?' down to them, reversing this normally omni-directional line of questioning.

A Hard Day's Night responded to this bizarre situation, in which the band were world famous, but nobody seemed to be able to identify them. It 'pulled the Beatles apart' for the first time, and 'in close-up the individual differences that the group status had effaced were […] accentuated' (Walker 1974: 238). Thus, the common depiction of The Beatles as 'characters'—McCartney as the 'cute one', Harrison as the 'quiet one', for example—largely emerged from their *A Hard Day's Night* characters. Its influence is clear, as can be seen from the composition of successive manufactured pop groups, such as The Monkees and the Spice Girls, where different members are chosen, in part, for their contrasting and complementary physical or personal attributes.

A key way in which these individual personas are formed within *A Hard Day's Night* is through a series of comic solo sequences in which each Beatle—with the exception of McCartney, whose scene was cut—is given the space to play themselves outside of the group collective under the scrutiny of the documentary-like camera. These sequences all revolve around a repetition of the same joke: when a Beatle is alone and separated

from the group their identity comes into question, often to the point that they become unrecognisable. The gag makes its first appearance during the opening credits when Paul is seen seated beside his grandfather on a bench on the station platform sporting a stick-on beard and moustache that hardly conceals his features at all. The joke, of course, is that this is an appallingly inept disguise for a famous rock star. Yet it is not until he is joined by the other three Beatles as they hurtle along the platform that he becomes recognisable as part of the larger group and risks being mobbed by the pursuing fans. To hammer the joke home, he becomes part of the chase *before* he has removed the fake facial hair.

In Lennon's solo sequence, he is stopped in one of the theatre's backstage corridors by Millie (Anna Quayle) who swoons in recognition. 'You look just like him', she states, assuming that he can't possibly be the real John Lennon, despite his physical similarities. She has made a correct identification. However, the reality of an encounter with John in-the-flesh does not appear to live up to the image in her imagination. The brilliantly absurd sequence gains much of its comic impetus from the reversal of our expectations. Rather than growing more certain of John's identity as the conversation unfolds, the opposite happens. 'Oh you are [him]. I know you are', Millie says as they pass each other, despite John's protestations to the contrary. However, as the sequence progresses, doubt becomes increasingly apparent on her face and she is forced to put on the horn-rimmed glasses that have been hanging from her neck for a clearer view. 'You don't look like him at all', she finally concludes, sending John off in a sulk.

These sequences establish The Beatles' status as a group of individuals viewed at a distance, and thus distorted through the lens of separation. As the characters with whom they interact and the camera—and thus the audience—get closer, the proximity reveals the gulf between image and reality. For the film audience, the camera's proximity seems to allow us direct and close access to our idols. This apparent stripping away of the public image, however, results in a separation of person and persona; Millie might have encountered the 'real' John Lennon, but he doesn't measure up to the alternate reality of his public image.

Taking a wrong turn on his way to the canteen, George wanders into the production offices of the fictional UTV. Once again, a case of mistaken identity drives the scene, which unfolds as a comedy sketch based on the premise that successive pop cultural movements are manufactured and styled by media corporations to sell tie-in products. Simon (Kenneth Haigh), a television producer, mistakes George for one of their plants, and

the lack of recognition on the part of those responsible for responding to, and perhaps even directing, the path of pop culture is one of the film's sharpest barbs at the generational gulf and the anonymity of The Beatles' group persona. These three sequences taken together suggest that nobody involved in the world of Beatlemania outside of the core group—not the fans, the media producers, nor the more casual audience—actually recognise their idols when they are up-close-and-personal. The group dynamic erases their individual autonomy.

The most extended and accomplished of all of the solo sequences is Ringo's, and it is one of the film's comic highlights. Paul's grandfather has convinced the drummer to go on strike so as to take a stand against a series of perceived slights that have been inflicted upon him by his fellow band members. Skipping out on the imminent rehearsal he walks the streets near the television studio taking photographs and searching for anonymity. Unlike his compatriots, Ringo *is* initially recognised by two teenage girls. This initial act of recognition is in keeping with Ringo's position as a slight outsider to the band, both within the world of the film and in reality. In the film Ringo has been mocked by his band-mates for having a large nose and for being overly precious about his drums, creating a mild three-against-one dynamic. Although he is also initially mocked for his lack of fan mail it soon becomes clear that he has the largest pile and so is perhaps the most identifiable of the four as far as the fans are concerned. Starr is also marked as different due to his age (he is several months older than Lennon, and two and three years older than McCartney and Harrison, respectively), his stage name and—though this is not mentioned in the film—the fact that he was the last to join the band, replacing Pete Best as part of a pre-existing set-up. Ringo's visibility is thus unsurprising. However—unlike Paul—he finds anonymity thanks to a rudimentary change in appearance. The simple addition of a trench coat and hat, quickly purchased from a nearby second-hand clothes shop, are enough to hide his identity. 'Get out of it, shorty', a young woman exclaims when he tests out his disguise, to his evident satisfaction, but also to the consternation of a watching policeman (Jerry Young) who also fails to recognise him.

Ringo might not be recognisable, but he is hardly invisible. He causes mayhem in a pub at lunchtime when the incompatibility between his newly fashioned identity as a truant and his actual status as world-famous rock star is manifested through his physical inability to navigate the space of the working-class pub into which he literally and figuratively no longer fits. He begins by showing his snobbery by complaining about the stale

sandwiches. He then ruins a game of shove ha'penny by dropping copious amounts of change on the board when trying to pay for his pint of beer. This he subsequently destroys by absent-mindedly placing it in the middle of a game of table-skittles, just in time for the ball to smash through the glass, showering the playing surface with beer. Turning his attention to the dart board, he attempts a lonely game against himself which ends with first a customer's sandwich, and then the perch of the birdcage impaled by woefully wayward throws. He is described as a trouble-maker by the proprietor (Clare Kelly) and forced to leave, something once again observed by the watching policeman.

The disastrous course of this short scene is determined by Ringo's anonymity. Were he to have been recognised, he would surely have been warmly welcomed in the pub, the drinks would have been on the house (or on Ringo) and all play would have stopped. As it is, Ringo's incompatibility with his surroundings unfolds as a Jerry Lewis-esque slapstick routine. Geoff King has argued that Lewis's mode of destructive comedy comes from his character's 'exaggerated respect for dominant social values' (King 2002: 81). King acknowledges Steven Shaviro's view that this means that Lewis's comic characters disseminate 'chaos in the course of earnestly trying to do exactly what bosses, psychoanalysts, media specialists, and other technicians of normalising power want him to do' (Shaviro 1993: 110). Ringo is not such a stickler for the social order. Nevertheless, it is from his attempts to blend into a world that may once have been his own, but is no longer, that physical anarchy erupts throughout the pub.

The final straw comes when he attempts to help a young woman (Laura Thurlow) through a building site by sacrificing his newly bought coat so as to act as a protective layer between the mud and her shoes. Together they navigate two puddles successfully, but the third attempt backfires when the puddle is revealed to actually be a large hole, a fact not made clear to Ringo, the woman or the audience until the moment when she disappears below the surface with an agonising squelch. Now under close observation by the policeman he is arrested and taken to the police station where the gag sequence is 'topped' as he attempts to re-adopt the persona of rock star to escape a criminal charge. 'I'm Ringo Starr! I've got a show to do. I'm on in a few minutes. You've got to let me go!' he pleads. But it's too late. Away from the group, his anonymity has been too successfully established. 'I'm Ringo!' he exclaims one final time. 'That's what they all say', comes the reply from the nonplussed policeman.

The one section of Ringo's solo scene that I have not yet mentioned is his riverside walk, during which he skims stones, attempts to take his own photograph and meets up with a schoolboy who is also playing truant. This short sequence is where the escapist subplot of the film is at its most focused. Ringo is free from the burdens of fame, but is also lonely, as he wanders along the gravelly shore of the river, navigating wooden spurs, loose rocks and puddles. Starr exhibits a Chaplin-esque performance of comic melancholy, which the actor later attributed to having a hangover that made him feel 'like shit' (Craske et al. 2000: 129). The tone of the sequence is one of comic pathos where even his camera turns against him, plopping dejectedly into the river as he attempts to take a self-portrait. It acts as the culmination of the subplot that has seen Ringo contemplating his outsider status within The Beatles.

In eight-and-three-quarter-year-old Charley (David Janson), Ringo briefly finds a kindred spirit; a boy separated from the officialdom of school, but temporarily abandoned by his friends who have 'chickened out'. As Charley describes his friends—'mad' Ginger, Eddy, who's 'good at punching and spitting' and 'big head' Ding Dong—the individuality and group dynamic of Ringo's own musical cohort is reflected back at him. The support structure found within Charley's group of friends is articulated verbally—Ding Dong's bigheadedness (like Ringo's big nose?) is described as being 'all right 'cos he's one of the gang'—and visually when he is reunited with his friends and returns to the playful tussle of youth. Just as clear is the weariness of being alone. Ringo realises that Charley's experience of playing truant is 'not much cop without them' and we see a clear parallel between Ringo's pathetic solo excursion here and the fun-filled truancy of the earlier 'Can't Buy Me Love' sequence which depends on all four bandmates escaping together. As Charley rejoins his friends, leaving Ringo alone once again, the tensions between fame and anonymity and between autonomy and collective identity are clear, though Charley's characterisation of his friends' individual tics and traits as they contribute *too* and *within* the group dynamic offer a model through which similar group and individual identities can be articulated by The Beatles. This is, of course, a key project of *A Hard Day's Night* itself, and in this respect it functions as an investigation of individual identity that is more frequently the subject of the documentary.

This mode of self-performance enables the band members to distance themselves from their previous media representations through the performance of individual characters, separate from the group dynamic. At the

same time, the mockumentary aesthetic gives the appearance of providing exclusive access to the realities of life as a Beatle, the characterisations appearing as only a mildly caricatured version of the band members' real personalities. Walker notes that this emphasising of the individual musicians' differences 'paradoxically lengthened the life-time of the Beatles as a group, for opening up their individual identities to inspection averted the [...] risk of the public's being sated and wearied with the Beatles as a four-headed monster' (Walker 1974: 238–239).

This ironical situation was to a significant extent the result of the closeness–distance paradox embodied in the convergence of the documentary-like aesthetic and the exaggerated, comic characterisation of the four leads. Indeed, this distance through self-performance is an aspect of the film that the band successfully utilised several times throughout their career. Most significantly, McCartney's original concept for the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album was built around the idea that 'we'd pretend to be someone else'—Sgt. Pepper's band—and that as a result 'you could do anything when you got to the mike [*sic*] or on your guitar because it wasn't *you*' (Craske et al. 2000: 241). Lennon notes that this manoeuvre was also about increasing personal freedom, and putting 'some distance between The Beatles and the public' (ibid.).

The Paradox of Self-Performance

The Beatles' self-performance is a central aspect of both *A Hard Day's Night* and *What's Happening!*, yet the way in which these performances are manifested is different in each film. The camera's presence in *A Hard Day's Night* is never acknowledged, in line with the 'representational performances' that Waugh argues is common to observational documentaries *and* most fiction films (2011: 75–76). However the documentary-like shooting style, and *A Hard Day's Night*'s tangible links to reality, complicates the idea of viewing the film as straightforwardly fictional. Even though we know that The Beatles are playing versions of themselves, it remains difficult to separate these performances from the reality, something that the mockumentary form exacerbates. Conversely, the manner in which they display themselves for the Maysles' camera, and indeed for all the other journalists in *What's Happening!*, is one of the most open examples of a subject's direct engagement with the documentary camera in the direct cinema canon. Only the Maysles' later film *Grey Gardens* (1975), co-directed by their editors Ellen Hovde and Muffie Meyer, is as open with its performative elements.

Self-conscious comic performance becomes the locus around which these disruptions take place. The band members' near-constant waving at, looking into, or acting up for the documentary camera shatters any intention the Maysles may have had of suggesting that their presence had not affected their subjects' behaviour. I have already detailed a number of examples, but one further one is particularly illustrative of the negotiations that take place between direct cinema filmmaker and documentary subject, and it shows very clearly the disjuncture between what is expected of an observational documentary subject and what we get in *What's Happening!* In an outtake from the film included on its DVD release, the musicians are gathered around the Nagra tape recorder—which is located off-screen below the lower boundary of the frame—questioning the Maysles brothers about the technology. McCartney looks at Albert and says, 'if we could get the camera down on this mic it'd be a right laugh', indicating to the off-screen space. Maysles is reluctant, but McCartney cheekily implores him to 'go on, defy convention'. Maysles eventually moves the camera down to the Nagra to a loud cheer from the surrounding entourage as McCartney says, 'Cut, take 29'. It is a fascinating moment, because it demonstrates the curiosity the subjects of a documentary might naturally have in the practical aspects of the filmmaking process which are usually edited out, as this moment was from the main film. McCartney's 'defy convention' comment makes it clear that The Beatles knew exactly how they were *supposed* to behave for the documentary camera, but that they deliberately decided not to do so. Paradoxically then, the 'representational' (Waugh 2011: 76) performances of acting as if the camera is not there found in *A Hard Day's Night* are much closer to our expectations of observational documentary than the 'presentational' performances found in the actual documentary.

Again, it should be stressed that, tonally, we would not mistake *A Hard Day's Night* for a documentary. However, there is a significant disparity in The Beatles' performances between the two films which makes viewing one as somehow more 'truthful' than the other problematic. The fact that the band members are so obviously acting up for the Maysles' camera means that we know that we are not really getting to see what The Beatles are really like as people outside of the public eye; they are never 'off'. In *A Hard Day's Night*, the documentary-like access to the hotel rooms and private off-stage spaces, and the lack of direct-to-camera performance, seem to offer the audience a more insightful glimpse into the real world of The Beatles than the documentary does.

This is most pronounced in the concert sequences of both films. The Maysles can only view their subjects from afar, placed within the crowd or, in one memorable instance, viewing a live television performance via an ordinary family's television set, and so are given no more privileged access to the performance than the fans. In *A Hard Day's Night* the camera has free reign over the bodies of the musicians and their instruments and the final concert is filmed in such a way that there is a real sense of proximity; we are on stage with them, not in the crowd looking on. As a result it frequently feels like Lester's camera is doing what the Maysles' camera cannot: gaining backstage access to The Beatles without altering their behaviour with its presence. However, since both films are almost completely composed of footage of the band members performing themselves it is difficult to argue that either film presents us with the 'real' Beatles, although *What's Happening!*'s status as a genuine documentary might suggest that it should.

The lack of interaction with the camera means that *A Hard Day's Night* looks very close to what an observational documentary is 'supposed' to look like. The result is a film that takes the 'characters' from *What's Happening!* but presents them in a way that is closely aligned to traditional theorisations of direct cinema, which, as both Winston (1993: 50) and Waugh (2011) suggest, in its desire to hide the filmmaking process has much in common with classical modes of fiction filmmaking. *A Hard Day's Night*, then, is unusual in that although it is directly linked to the reality of The Beatles, it achieves this by being a reconstructed and re-enacted version of reality, acting as a playful parody of the band's contemporary situation. What enables the comedy to be parodic in nature is that the band members are not simply *being* themselves, but versions of themselves; sanitised versions of the documentary self-performances enacted by John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr and George Harrison for the Maysles' camera.

In their following film, *Help!* (1965), this transposition is made explicit, through the adoption of a more fantastical style in place of the observational documentary aesthetic and aiming several jokes squarely at the previous film. It is entirely clear that The Beatles of *Help!* are not supposed to represent the real-world Beatles at all. Instead *Help!* distils the *Hard Day's Night* version of The Beatles down to their essence, rendering them as more stylised, completely fictional characters. This is made clear in the opening sequence of the film when each member opens a different door in a row of terraced houses before a cut reveals that all four doors open up

onto one enormous room, with sunken beds, an organ that rises from the floor, and a patch of indoor grass with its own gardener. This self-conscious depiction of the gulf between public image and private reality is enhanced by two observing women who, unaware of the opulent 'reality' behind the closed doors, reference the band's monochrome past, believing them to be 'just the same as they was [*sic*] before they "was"'.

A Hard Day's Night is, therefore, removed from the reality of The Beatles by at least two levels of performance, as the anarchic, comic 'self-performance as self-defence' found in *What's Happening!* has itself been reproduced, reperformed and fictionalised. By the time these various performances have been distilled into the comic characters seen in *A Hard Day's Night*, they are some distance from the actual personalities of the various Beatles. At the same time, the film's lack of temporal distance from the realities of Beatlemania mean that it does have backstage—even 'on-stage'—access to the present, paradoxically helping to create the band members' personas, even as it reveals them to be performances, several levels removed from reality. These ironic juxtapositions are articulated through comedy and exacerbated by the film's style which helped to popularise the mockumentary form. That it often looks more like what a direct cinema film is supposed to look like than the genuine documentary is significant, as it suggests that the versions of The Beatles that we see in *A Hard Day's Night* are no less 'real' than the versions found in *What's Happening!* The discussion of *This is Spinal Tap* in the following chapter complicates these debates further, by suggesting that an apparently fake band has the ability to transcend their performative origins to become a real band in their own right.

Notes

1. Several different versions of *What's Happening!* exist: the original fifty-minute *World in Action* (1963–1998) television film, broadcast by Granada in February 1964; the American broadcast from November 1964; The Maysles' seventy-four-minute cut; and two versions re-edited by Apple for television broadcast and DVD release under the title *The Beatles: The First U.S. Visit* (1994). See Joe McElhaney (2009: 65–67, 175–179) for an overview of the differences between the versions. Due to issues of access, this chapter uses the first American broadcast from 13 November 1964 and the 2004 DVD release as its sources. The majority of the scenes discussed are found in both versions. Where this is not the case, this is made clear in the text. In addition, some of the footage from *What's Happening!* has been

repurposed for use in various compilation documentaries, most notably *The Beatles Anthology* (1995) television series and the Ron Howard feature film *The Beatles: Eight Days a Week—The Touring Years* (2016) where it forms part of the record of the February 1964 US tour.

2. The day-in-the-life focus of the film also retreads a well-worn documentary path, evident in films such as *Man with a Movie Camera/Chelovek s kino-apparatom* (1929) and *Berlin: Symphony of a City/Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (1927).
3. This is not a situation unique to The Beatles. In *Dont Look Back*, Dylan's car is mobbed on several occasions, most memorably by a young woman who climbs onto the car and has to be removed by a group of passers-by for her own safety.
4. This is another example of the potentially problematic gendering of the mockumentary. Despite *A Hard Day's Night*'s playfulness, the film positions The Beatles' fans (and particularly the girls and women) as their key adversaries which are tolerated only because they are the price paid for their success. The boys on the other hand are frequently portrayed as being helpful to the main characters. That the film sells this image of The Beatles' female fans back to those same fans is not a little troublesome.

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CHAPTER 3

Parodying Performance in *This Is Spinal Tap*

'Sends up what The Beatles started with *A Hard Day's Night* [1964]'. So says a *Playboy* review of the seminal 1984 rock-mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) quoted in a television advert for the film. This is an odd statement given that *A Hard Day's Night* is not a documentary. It is, however, a pioneering mockumentary that was important to the development of both the mockumentary and rock-documentary forms. Alongside *Help!* (1965), *What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A.* (1964) and *Dont Look Back* (1967), *A Hard Day's Night* ignited a trend for popular musicians *playing themselves* (hence the omission of Elvis, Cliff Richard and The Dave Clark Five's *Catch Us If You Can* [1965] from this list) as a key subject for both observation documentary and fiction filmmakers.

A large number of music documentaries were made between *A Hard Day's Night* and *This Is Spinal Tap*, including *Dont Look Back*, *Monterey Pop* (1968), *Gimme Shelter* (1970), *Woodstock* (1969), *Let it Be* (1970), *Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same* (1976), *The Last Waltz* (1978) and Tony Palmer's epic television series *All You Need is Love: The Story of Popular Music* (1977). The mockumentary form was also developing during this period and in particular *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash* (1978) and *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (1980)—a fictionalised version of the story of the British punk band The Sex Pistols—continued the form's thematic links with music.

R. Wallace, *Mockumentary Comedy*, Palgrave Studies in Comedy,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77848-8_3

Although almost certainly referencing *A Hard Day's Night* in the context of the rock-movie (the form that *A Hard Day's Night* could be argued to have initiated and that *Spinal Tap* sends up), this statement hints at a more complicated relationship between these two specific films than merely the beginning and end of a parodic process. *A Hard Day's Night* was one of the first semi-biographical rock movies seen by a large audience and demonstrated the form's popularity. However, its status as a mockumentary creates a dual relationship with *This is Spinal Tap*, positioning it as a central text in the initiation of both the rock-movie (the form that *Spinal Tap* parodies) and the mockumentary (the form that is used by *Spinal Tap* as a framing device for the parody), paradoxically occupying a position that is both the target *and the means* of the parody.

The *Playboy* review recognises that *This is Spinal Tap* marks a turning point in the rock-film, because, like *A Hard Day's Night* before it, the rock-documentary and the fictional rock star vehicle converge, producing an entirely fictional film that looks like a documentary. Its importance is evidenced by the way successive rock-documentaries have felt it necessary to reference *Spinal Tap* and negotiate the challenge posed by its predominance. A significant aspect of this challenge is Spinal Tap's relationship with real bands, particularly the closeness of the film's parody to the realities of the rock and roll lifestyle.

Spinal Tap is a fictional British heavy metal band comprising lead guitarist Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest), singer David St Hubbins (Michael McKean)—named after the patron saint of quality footwear—and bassist Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer) and an ever-changing line-up of keyboard players and ill-fated drummers. Directed by fictional director Marty DiBergi (Rob Reiner—also the director of *This is Spinal Tap*), who had previously only made television commercials, the fictional documentary is framed as a record of the band's 1982 American tour promoting their controversial album *Smell the Glove*.

It is emblematic of the cultural impact of the film that the word 'rockumentary'—which was coined for the film—has become an established term in its own right, used to describe straight music or rock-documentaries. The film is also probably the most well-known 'mockumentary'. In recent years the film has become increasingly difficult to discuss, partly because it has become so familiar. As Ethan de Seife notes, '[it] is one of those films that may, by now, be taken for granted' (2007: 11). In 2011 a *Time Out* poll voted the film the greatest comedy of all

time (Jenkins 2011). The film's reach is visible in a range of cultural spaces as diverse as *The Simpsons* (1989–) and the BBC's iPlayer streaming service, whose volume control 'goes up to eleven', referencing Tufnel's infamous amp that has taken on a life of its own and entered common parlance separate to the film. This familiarity has resulted in the film occupying a no-man's-land between cult and the mainstream. In his monograph on the film for Wallflower's Cultography series, de Seife notes that although *Spinal Tap* is a cult film, it 'resists a fair number of attempts to explain the nature of its cult status' (2007: 99). I would suggest that the film's intriguing manipulation of fact and fiction, the intangibility of the layering of reality, and the collapsing of the fake and the real would be high on the list of reasons.

This chapter will examine the ways in which the parody in *This Is Spinal Tap* works, how performance creates comedy through imitation and inversion, and also how these performances complicate the film's relationship with reality and the straight music documentary. The performances in *Spinal Tap* are complex ones, in part because of the choice to parody heavy metal, a style of music already grounded in a mode of extreme performativity. The way in which the band members perform as 'documentary' subjects adds further levels of performativity, and the fact that the band continues to exist as a genuine touring and recording entity, outside of the diegesis of the film, challenges their apparently straightforwardly fictional status. The impact of the film on the rock-documentary will also be addressed here, particularly the paradoxical implication that the fiction often appears to be being reperformed by genuine documentaries.

Documentary and Comedy: Competing Registers

Judith Butler, writing about *Paris is Burning* (1990), a documentary depicting the 1980s drag ball scene of the New York African-American and Latino gay and transgender community, discusses the concept of 'realness' that is negotiated by the film and the culture that it depicts. The balls comprise a series of competitive performance categories, including 'opulence', 'the executive' and 'the Ivy League student', which contestants must emulate in an attempt to 'pass' as the best example of that category. The winner of each category is the one that most closely resembles the thing that they are imitating. For Butler, realness

> is a standard that is used to judge any given performance within the established categories [… and] what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. (1993: 129)

Significantly, a performance that 'passes' is one 'that effects realness, to the extent that it *cannot* be read' (ibid.).

Butler's notion of 'realness' is useful here, as *This is Spinal Tap* has a complex relationship with the concepts of the real and the fake. In *Paris is Burning*, the contestants are almost exclusively black and Latino. Consequently, it is unlikely that they are ever going to achieve complete 'unreadability' because most of the categories require a performance of white heterosexuality. There is, therefore, always a gap between the performance and that which is being performed. However, this gap is necessary in order for a performance to be judged *as* a performance; if the contestant were to be genuinely unreadable then there is no sense that a successful performance is occurring, as the display cannot be recognised as a performance at all. To be too good is to fail in the competition.

Spinal Tap's relationship with this conception of 'realness' is similarly complicated, as the band is in turn both readable and unreadable, and so simultaneously 'pass' and 'fail to pass' as real. Most obviously, the band's status as a fiction marks a clear failure in its ability to pass as real, and as with *A Hard Day's Night*, the film is set up as a fiction from the start, however, the hints to that effect are initially quite subtle. Leaning against a film camera, 'behind the scenes' in an empty sound-stage, and directly addressing the audience, DiBergi introduces himself, the band and the film: 'Hello. My name is Marty DiBergi. I'm a filmmaker. I make a lot of commercials. That little dog that chases the covered wagon underneath the sink? That was mine.' The tone of the scene, from DiBergi's over-friendly, almost casual, manner to the slightly askew dialogue, signals that the film is not entirely straight. Although the direct-address and back stage location (complete with cameras, lighting rigs, reflectors and a viewfinder hanging from DiBergi's neck) tell us that we are watching a documentary, Jason Middleton notes that the 'almost hyperbolic multiplication of signifiers of a "behind-the-scenes view" of the filmmaking process has a comic effect' (2014: 33). Again, however, things are not entirely straightforward. The commercial to which DiBergi alludes might sound preposterous, but it does describe with reasonable accuracy a memorable 1970s advert for Purina Chuck Wagon dog food.[1] An element of cognitive

dissonance may be in play for some viewers, then, with memories of the genuine advert playing off DiBergi's comic reminiscence of it. DiBergi, of course, did not direct the commercial.[2]

DiBergi goes on to recall watching Spinal Tap perform at a Greenwich Village club called The Electric Banana in 1966. Describing the band as 'now-legendary', he notes that he was 'knocked out' by their 'exuberance, their raw power … and their punctuality'. The dialogue therefore contains a bombardment of clues, telling the audience that what they are watching is not real: how can Spinal Tap be 'legendary' if we have never heard of them? Why would anyone be 'blown away' by punctuality? Why is a director of ludicrous television commercials making a documentary about a heavy metal band?

Alongside the dialogue, the self-awareness of documentary performance is highlighted by DiBergi's inability to find a comfortable position for his arms. First he leans one arm on the camera, then he grasps his lapels, then he folds them for less than a second, before finally letting them hang down by his sides. DiBergi's acute awareness of his own body causes the faked naturalness to become stilted performance. Nevertheless, the adoption of documentary conventions acts to naturalise these tics, so that even though we might sense that all is not as it should be, it can take several viewings of the film before we spot the oddities, such is the urge to adopt a documentary mode of engagement.

The film is also populated with instances in which the credibility of the 'documentary' image—its ability to 'pass'—is challenged progressively as a sequence develops. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik's conceptualisation of verisimilitude (1990) is once again in play here (see Chap. 2), as many sequences begin well within a documentary mode of verisimilitude, replicating well-known events from the world of genuine pop music and presenting them in a documentary style. Hand-held, observational sequences, archival clips, interview footage and historical artefacts (album covers, photographs, press reviews) exist side-by-side in the same film. Although the variety of different documentary modes offers another display of the mockumentary's porosity—very few genuine documentaries actually look like this—it does present a convincing performance of a generic idea of what a 'documentary' looks like. This plays a key part in the film's comedy as documentary verisimilitude gradually gives way to comic verisimilitude. However, unlike *A Hard Day's Night*, where these paradigmatic shifts generally occur suddenly and surprisingly, in *This is Spinal Tap* the shift is usu-

ally gradual, and so the balance of verisimilitudinous elements can have moved quite a long way before we realise that comedy now dominates.

Early in the film, an interview concerning the band's past turns to the subject of drummers, the first of which—John 'Stumpy' Pepys (Ed Begley, Jr.)—we are told, was a tall blonde geek with glasses who died young. The scene alternates between shots of the band—usually a tight two-shot of Tufnel and St Hubbins—and close-up 'noddies' of DiBergi's reactions. We are well within the bounds of credibility here, with the comment recalling a number of rock and roll musicians who have died young: Robert Johnson, Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin all famously died at the age of 27 for example. However, after a slight pause, St Hubbins clarifies that Pepys died 'in a bizarre gardening accident', which ramps up the comic stakes because, in addition to gardening being an unlikely cause of death, the joke hinges on the incongruity of the accident being the result of a mundane domestic chore. It suggests that the members of Spinal Tap can't even die in a manner befitting the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll lifestyle of the heavy metal musician.

Although a close-up of DiBergi nodding solemnly helps to uphold the story's veracity, it quickly becomes clear that Stumpy's unlikely cause of death is just one in a long series of unfortunate drummer-related fatalities, referencing similarly ill-fated sticks-men such as The Who's Keith Moon, Led Zeppelin's John Bonham and The New York Dolls' Billy Murcia who all died at a young age.[3] As DiBergi asks what happened to their second drummer, Eric 'Stumpy Joe' Childs, the shot of Tufnel and St Hubbins pans to the right reacting to include the off-screen voice of Derek Smalls as he explains that the official explanation for Childs's death was that he 'choked on vomit'. Again, this explanation remains plausible, particularly since numerous rock musicians, including the aforementioned Bonham, Murcia and Hendrix, but also Bon Scott (AC/DC) and 'Mama' Cass Elliot (The Mamas and the Papas), all died from accidental suffocation. However, Tufnel raises the comedy stakes even further by adding the fact that 'it was actually someone else's vomit' that Childs choked on. The comical impracticalities of such a demise are underlined by Smalls noting that there was no way of proving whose vomit it was that suffocated Childs, because, as Tufnel says, Scotland Yard do not have the facilities to 'dust for vomit', as they might fingerprints. Again, much of the humour is derived from juxtaposition and incongruity, this time with technical, forensic language being combined with the musician's stupidity and the gross-out humour that is suggested by the implied chain of events that

resulted in Childs's demise. By this stage the levels of credibility have been tested far beyond the bounds of believability. Documentary verisimilitude has given way to comedy, though it might have taken some time for the comedic impulse to overtake the allure of its aesthetic context.

Spinal Tap, in the film at least, are not *meant* to pass as real, though the unintended duping of an audience remains a possibility if these extreme moments are not recognised as such. As Jane Roscoe states, '[m]ock-documentary texts usually succeed as hoaxes because viewers fail to read cues that reveal the films' fictional status' (2000: 3). However, this is very unlikely in *Spinal Tap* where much of the humour in the film functions as parody. The comedy depends on the film being understood to be fictional, and it is essential that we recognise from the start that what we are seeing is not real, hence *Spinal Tap*'s barrage of textual cues.

There is an extensive literature on parody (see Jameson [1988], Rose [1993], Hutcheon [2000] and Harries [2000]) in which it is considered to be a form of comic imitation which works in the visual media by targeting a specific set of images, characters or themes and changing them through strategies such as misdirection, literalisation, inversion and exaggeration (Harries 2000), in order to distance the comic imitations from the originals. This practice depends on several acts of encoding and decoding to transform a target into parody and to have that parody recognised as such by its audience. Margaret A. Rose suggests that 'the work to be parodied', in this case generic rock and roll scenarios, the historical narratives of real bands and the rock documentaries that they feature in, 'is "decoded" by the parodist and offered again (or "encoded") in a "distorted" or changed form': the parody (1993: 39). This is then presented

> to another decoder, the reader of the parody, whose expectations for the original of the parodied work may also be played upon and evoked and then transformed by the parodist as a part of the parody work. (Ibid.)

For parody to work successfully, the audience must therefore 'simultaneously engage with both the foregrounded text (the parody) and the backgrounded target' and this '"doubleness" needs to be *noticed as double* in order for the text to be read specifically as a parody' (Harries 2000: 24). It is this 'decoding' that makes a comic parody such as *This is Spinal Tap* fun and satisfying to watch.

It is at this point that the use of a fake documentary aesthetic to frame a parody becomes potentially paradoxical. As with Butler's discussion of

'reading' performances, a successful parody depends on the audience recognising that parody is occurring for it to be judged as such. However, the fake documentary style has the potential to neutralise parodic elements by making them appear credible. If this occurs, the text can no longer be read as parody. This requirement to be recognised as fake for the comedy to be effective is yet another reason why the comic mockumentary does not invest itself primarily in critiquing the documentary form through direct appropriation. *Spinal Tap* prioritises comedy over documentary critique, because it is vital that we recognise early on that it is a parody, and therefore fictional. DiBergi's introduction and the 'dust for vomit' scene both occur within the opening six minutes of the film and are central aspects in orientating the viewer.

Nevertheless, the documentary-like image cannot be straightforwardly dismissed as an affectation. Since much of the comedy plays on the juxtaposition of the sobering documentary form with the ridiculous content, it is essential that the image retains a convincing documentary 'look', so as to increase this gulf and enhance the comedy. This aesthetic requirement works in tandem with the film's production process. Most of the film was improvised by the performers around a loose storyline. This adds to the film's comic effect because, 'the jokes summon not only our laughter but our appreciation when we know that they were invented on the spur of the moment' (de Seife 2007: 4). Furthermore, they provide a genuine spontaneity for which limited planning could be undertaken. This was harnessed by Peter Smokler, *Spinal Tap*'s cinematographer who had documentary credentials, having worked as a cameraman on the music documentaries *Gimme Shelter*, *Celebration at Big Sur* (1971) and *Jimi Plays Berkeley* (1971), as well as Peter Watkins's non-comic mockumentary *Punishment Park* (1971). This combination of an improvised style of acting with an observational documentary cameraman filming spontaneously and on-the-fly results in an image which shares much with observational modes of documentary filmmaking. The direct cinema sections look like *What's Happening!*, *Dont Look Back* and *Gimme Shelter*. The live sequences were genuinely performed live before an audience, thus doing for real that which is supposed to be fake, permeating the porous boundary between real and fake. As such they look stylistically similar to those found in *Monterey Pop*, *The Song Remains the Same* and *The Last Waltz*. In short, the documentary-like style is not an affectation, but the result of genuine production choices. As Christopher Guest has emphasised,

> [Smokler] would be running round the room like a real documentary cameraman […] Peter's instincts were very, very good […] Because the improvisation mimics what would really happen, he was able to instinctively just do what he would do as a cameraman if this were a real documentary. (Guest 1998)

Nevertheless, the humour does overwhelm these documentary impulses. Once the viewer is aware that processes of parody are in operation, they are then invited to mobilise their knowledge of pop history to identify what is being parodied and how. Unlike the direct parody of a specific band, as can be seen with The Rutles, whom we specifically recognised as 'not-The Beatles', Spinal Tap is not tied to any one source of parodic inspiration. Instead, the parody works at a pervasive level, drawing on a range of generic and oft-repeated rock and roll events that happen to lots of bands, many of which the audience will be familiar with. The 'dust for vomit' scene remains credible for much of its duration because it is not uncommon for a rock musician to die young and in a misadventurous way, and because documentary verisimilitude is maintained throughout. The scene's parodic comedy only becomes a factor when the generic is indicated and exacerbated beyond credibility.

Parody and *Spinal Tap*

It is worth spending some time examining the detail of the parody in *Spinal Tap*. In one sequence we find Tufnel playing a delicate piece of music on the piano. The camera zooms out from a close up of the guitarist's playing hands to a medium shot of Tufnel seated at the piano, dressed in a leather jacket and nonchalantly chewing gum, DiBergi perched over him on a second stool. 'It's pretty', DiBergi declares hesitantly. And it is; at first. However, we are waiting for things to go awry, as the pattern of the film suggests it will. The scene builds on the juxtaposition of image and sound, with Tufnel's leather jacket, Jeff Beck-hair and gum chewing, completely at odds with the delicate music, and his pretensions are progressively raised throughout the scene. The unlikely combination of heavy metal and classical music is amusing in itself and parodies the strong, but seemingly incongruous, links between the two forms that was evident in rock music of the 1970s and 1980s (of which more later). From what we have seen of Spinal Tap's musical output, it is difficult to see how this piece—composed in a minor key—will fit within a repertoire of songs in major keys with such crude titles as 'Big Bottom' and 'Sex Farm'.

However, this simple joke is soon eclipsed by the faux sophistication embodied in Tufnel's description of the tune as being in D-minor, which he describes as 'the saddest of all keys'. Although Tufnel's certainty here appears misplaced—sadness is, after all, a subjective emotion—the joke is sufficiently nuanced to move beyond this simple reading. Indeed, Tufnel has music theory and history on his side. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, different musical keys were thought to express specific emotions, with Christian Schubart characterising D-minor as the key of 'melancholy womanliness, the spleen and humours brood' in 1806 (Steblin 1983: 121) and Justin Heinrich Knecht suggesting that it was 'gently sorrowing' (ibid.: 130). Although Bin Wu et al. (2014) have argued that musical key is less important to the generation of emotion in music than timbre, Adam Neely (2017) argues that certain keys are particularly suited to certain types of instrument, with D-minor sounding particularly sad if played on brass instruments. It is ironic that Tufnel's view that D-minor is the saddest of all keys is enhanced by his decision to have the piece be performed on a horn, which he vocally imitates in a melancholic fashion. He has hit on a genuinely emotional combination of key and timbre, though the film suggests that this is not necessarily the result of any particular genius on Tufnel's part.

This complex joke is elevated into the realm of the preposterous by Tufnel's self-comparison to Mozart and Bach, which leaves us in no doubt about his pomposity. He describes the music as a 'Mach' piece, derived from an impromptu conflation of the composers' names that alludes directly to Ringo Starr's conflation of 'mod' and 'rocker' into 'mocker' in the press conference sequence in *A Hard Day's Night*. However, it is indicative of the complexity of the humour in this sequence that Bach and Mozart frequently composed in D-minor, and so Tufnel's musical pretensions are, in fact, correct. What is not in any doubt, however, is that he does not come close to the musical calibre of the great classical composers and in this self-comparison Tufnel has greatly overreached himself.

He is brought back down to earth when the abyss between intention and realisation is rendered magnificently with the revelation that this delicate tune is entitled—following a brief pause for comic effect—'Lick My Love Pump'. The punch-line highlights Tufnel's cluelessness and his unthinking need to tie even the most delicate piece of music back to the overly sexual and masculinised posturing of heavy metal. The title undermines any genuine artistic credibility that the piece might have had, though, crucially, Tufnel does not recognise the incongruity. In this

respect Tufnel fulfils the role of what Noël Carroll calls the 'monumentally unaware character' (1991: 30). Carroll argues that '[w]e laugh at the clown headed for a pratfall as he approaches a discarded banana peel because we see the banana peel and he doesn't *and* because we see that he doesn't see the banana peel' (ibid.). The comic climate of *Spinal Tap* means that we are cued in to the fact that in every scene a metaphorical banana peel awaits the characters. Comic surprise is maintained because we do not know the specifics of Tufnel et al.'s downfall, but we know that it is coming, and we know that neither he, nor DiBergi have seen it coming.

Instead, Tufnel simply returns his hands to the keys is if to continue playing, leaving DiBergi bemused—and the audience amused—by his lack of self-awareness. The short pause between Tufnel's declaration and the beginning of the next sequence allows a brief moment of respite for the audience to laugh, and affords DiBergi the time to give a slightly deflated nod of the head as if accepting that, despite DiBergi's best attempts to make him look good, Tufnel has shown himself up yet again.

The sequence is very funny in its own right, and all of the comic cues outlined so far are contained within the scene itself, in the combination of camera movement, editing, performance, sound, setting, costuming and other aspects of the *mise en scène*. However, much of the comedy in the sequence lies in the parody of the incongruous link between rock and classical music, and the sequence directly references a number of specific filmic examples of artists playing music that is, for various reasons, uncharacteristic. The opening of *Let It Be* finds Paul McCartney seated at a piano unconvincingly playing a series of melancholic arpeggios which Doug Sulphy and Ray Schweighardt suggest was 'Paul [taking advantage] of the others' absence by getting in some early morning piano practice as the cameras' rolled (2003: 30). The placement of this sequence at the start of a sombre film gives the sequence much more emphasis than McCartney probably intended, and its juxtaposition with the more traditional rocker, 'Don't Let Me Down', which cuts it short, highlights its artistic limitations. A similar sequence can be seen in *Dont Look Back* in which Dylan's rehearsal of a new composition whilst seated at a piano is marked out as self-indulgent due to its length and the song's dirge-like quality.

As with the 'dust for vomit' scene, the 'Mach' sequence moves gradually from the familiar and the believable (indeed almost the clichéd) to the absurd, building in a manner that highlights the comedy apparent in the juxtaposition of a heavy metal guitarist playing melancholic piano music.

The sequence takes as its generic source material various attempts by hard rock musicians to demonstrate their versatility across a range of musical styles in order to legitimate rock and heavy metal music. Tufnel's straight-edged description of his tune as being constructed of 'simple lines intertwining', complete with contemplative hand gestures, is characteristic of this. However, it also mirrors the pretensions of such actions, which appear contrived *because* they are out of character.

The 'Mach' reference strengthens the link between classical and heavy metal music in the scene, referencing the way comparisons to the former have often been used to validate the latter. In 1963 William Mann famously compared Lennon and McCartney's chord progressions to the work of Gustav Mahler (Neaverson 1997: 27), and heavy metal itself has also been likened to the work of certain classical composers. In the documentary *Metal—A Headbanger's Journey* (2005), journalist and DJ Malcolm Dome states that 'if Richard Wagner had been around today he'd probably be in Deep Purple, or Beethoven would've been happy to be in Led Zeppelin'. Rock and metal guitarists such as Yngwie Malmsteen have cited classical composers as an influence (Malmsteen's love of Bach and Paganini is particularly well known [Lalaina 2013]), whilst others have explored classical composition (Randy Rhodes classical guitar piece 'Dee' can be found on Ozzy Osbourne's *Blizzard of Oz* album), or have reimagined classical pieces as heavy metal or progressive rock songs (Emerson, Lake & Palmer's *Pictures at an Exhibition* live album rearranges Modest Mussorgsky's classical suite of the same name). All of these generic crossovers coalesce in the 'Mach' sequence, and are made doubly explicit during Spinal Tap's subsequent live performance of 'Heavy Duty' which includes a passage taken from Boccherini's *String Quintet in E, Op. 11, N.5*, interpreted as an electric guitar solo.

Since the 'Mach' sequence draws upon a large number of pre-existing reference points—and there are many more beyond the ones outlined here—the humour stems from our recognition that the scene is parodying those generic aspects of rock documentary style and popular music history familiar to a general audience. On the other hand, for those with a detailed knowledge of documentary film practices and a cursory knowledge of rock and pop history, *This is Spinal Tap* opens itself up to the possibility of an intense engagement between text and audience. The generic references begin to take on a new life and dynamism in the hands of an active and knowledgeable viewer who can bring their own specific examples into play. In some respects it is the audience that makes *Spinal Tap* parodic as much as it is the work of the filmmakers. Familiarity with any instance of this

kind results in a reading of the film which reflects back on *all* of the other potential targets, and so the sequence is simultaneously a direct parody of all and none of these specific sequences.

Most scenes in the film work along similar lines. When Tufnel plays his guitar by screeching first his tennis shoe and then a violin across the strings we could read it as a specific comic exaggeration of the sequence in *The Song Remains the Same*, in which Jimmy Page plays his guitar with a violin bow. However, for those unfamiliar with the Led Zeppelin concert film, the sequence also recalls the familiar signature playing technique and live performance styles of other iconic axe-men, such as Pete Townshend's wind-milling, Jimi Hendrix playing the guitar behind his head or with his teeth, or Anvil's 'Lips' Kudlow who frequently uses a sex toy as a slide.

Even without an understanding of any of these reference points, these sequences work because it is clear that Tufnel's piece should be called just about anything *except* 'Lick My Love Pump', and everybody but Tufnel knows that playing a guitar with a violin will produce a cacophony. As with much of *This is Spinal Tap*'s humour, the pinnacle of the sequence's comedy comes from the detail. It isn't just that he attempts to play the guitar with the violin that is funny, but that he realises that it doesn't sound quite right and retunes the violin a minute amount as if that will somehow make the difference. In doing so Guest et al. aim a jibe at guitarists such as Malmsteen and Steve Vai who tout themselves as 'serious' musicians.

This generic approach to parody produces a dense bricolage of references, which closely retread specific moments of pop history with enough deviation from the originals that they work as comic moments in their own right. As de Seife suggests, '*Spinal Tap* is funny and clever even if you don't know anything about rock music […] but it's surely a funnier and richer experience if you do' (2007: 6). Unlike *The Rutles*, where the parody would be incomprehensible if we did not know something about The Beatles, *This is Spinal Tap* works because many of the sequences are funny even if we do not recognise the references.

Parody and Performance

The emphasis on parody in *This is Spinal Tap* means that Spinal Tap the band has to be 'read' as an imitation which can never attain 'realness' as defined by Butler. There is always a gap between the band and that which it imitates because in order to recognise the parody we have to understand that performances are occurring. These performances are, therefore, readable *as* performances, and, by extension, Spinal Tap do not 'pass' as a real band.

Our ability to find parodic humour in *This is Spinal Tap* is dependent on a mutual acknowledgement that the text is not what it appears to be, but that this remains unstated. An element of ironic pretence is evident in the way we consume mockumentary comedy. Gregory Currie argues that the creation of irony involves 'the pretended adoption of a defective outlook' (2006: 121), or as James MacDowell notes, 'ironic expression inherently involves pretending to express a particular point of view, which one does not endorse, in order implicitly to convey a contrasting point of view' (2016: 24). Although both Currie and MacDowell are talking about the *production* of irony, we could extend their accounts of ironic pretence to the audience of irony, who—like the audience of parody—must recognise that irony is intended in order to read it as such. We know that *Spinal Tap* is not a documentary, and the film knows that we know. However, we adopt the pretence that it is and continue, at least at one level, to perform a viewing position that maintains the mockumentary's status as documentary—performing a documentary mode of engagement—whilst also acknowledging its fictionality, because it is funnier that way. The comic mockumentary can have its cake and eat it too, with viewers recognising the parody while also enjoying the film's performance of documentary conventions.

However, the question of Spinal Tap's passing as real is not so easily resolved once we begin to examine what we are judging the performance against. As we saw in the previous chapter, the popular musician, whether appearing in a documentary, in a fiction film or just as a public figure, is already always a performance, even if this is just the subconscious presentation of self in public. This is particularly apparent in the way in which different musical styles appear to require different performative modes. When Dylan uses Pennebaker's documentary camera in *Dont Look Back* to induce an image shift from folk singing troubadour to electric pop-rock star, there is an underlying suggestion that the role of 'electric pop star' is performed differently to that of 'folk singer', even if they are enacted by the same person.

This is an aspect of musical performance that David Byrne addresses when he argues that the *mise en scène* of musical performance, including clothing, hairstyle and movement, are all choices, often defined in relation to what has come before or what currently is. He recalls that in trying to find an initial performance and sartorial style for his band Talking Heads, '[t]he range of pre-existing performative models from which to draw on was overwhelming—and artistically invalid […] because those tropes were already taken' (2012: 45). Despite attempting to strip back style—there

would be 'no show-offy solos […] no rock moves or poses, no pomp or drama, no rock hair, no rock lights' (ibid.: 45–46)—Byrne came to realise that 'the simple act of getting on stage is in itself artificial' (ibid.: 46).

Spinal Tap takes great delight in engaging with, and highlighting, this aspect of public performance. Reiner includes numerous faked archival clips from various stages of the band's history. Keith Beattie argues that '[d]amaged, scratched or water-marked film evokes a degree of historical authenticity in the suggestion that the film survived the vicissitudes of the era it represents' (2004: 128) and in *Spinal Tap*'s faked archive, authentic 'age' is suggested by a haze of blurred smears which characterise videotape that is damaged, of low quality or degrading through age. This lends the images a distorted quality that is difficult to clearly make out and connotes authenticity.

In these clips Spinal Tap enact the major turns of mid-to-late twentieth-century pop music, each of which is performed in a vastly different way. The first incarnation of the band, then called The Thamesmen, is represented by a monochrome clip from a 1965 edition of fictional British television show *Pop, Look & Listen* (an affectionate parody of Associated Rediffusion's *Ready Steady Go!* [1963–1966]) (Fig. 3.1). The band performs the British invasion-esque 'Gimme Some Money', which parodies early Beatles' material, and the performance itself borrows heavily from British-invasion groups. All four band members have mop-top hairstyles,

Fig. 3.1 Spinal Tap perform a version of British-invasion pop in a distorted 'archival' clip of *Pop, Look & Listen*

wear black platform-heeled boots and grey collar-less Nehru suit jackets, similar to those designed by Douglas Millings for The Beatles. Like The Beatles, the four-piece is arranged on the stage so that the lead singer (in this case St Hubbins) has his own microphone, whilst the backing singers share. This enables them to come together for the harmonies and shake their heads like Paul McCartney and George Harrison. Bassist Ronnie Pudding (Danny Kortchmar) imitates The Shadows' signature performance routine by swinging his torso forwards and backwards, and St Hubbins swaggers and sneers like Mick Jagger.

The next archival clip is from a 1967 edition of the American music show *Jamboreepop* (Fig. 3.2), where Spinal Tap performs the psychedelic hit 'Listen to the Flower People'. The band's style of music, visual appearance, and the physicality of their performance is very different to that in the 'Gimme Some Money' clip. The formal suits have been replaced by casual flowery shirts, the solo is played on a sitar (though incongruously mimed on a guitar), the hairstyles are untamed and the image is in colour. Psychedelic rock—like British-invasion pop—is configured as comprising a structured and recognisable set of musical, performative, sartorial and staging choices which structure the generic musical form. In presenting the two extracts side by side these stark differences are shown to be imitable, and a different set of reference points is mobilised that includes

Fig. 3.2 Spinal Tap do psychedelic rock in a similarly 'aged' clip from the fictional *Jamboreepop* television show

Donovan's song 'Mellow Yellow', Paul McCartney's blue lamé suit from the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover, Jimmy Page's double-necked guitar, Ravi Shankar's sitar playing and the psychedelic visual effects regularly found in musical television programmes of the era, such as *Top of the Pops* (1964–2006). In accord with Byrne, simple adjustments to the range of physical and sonic components of musical presentation results in a radically different mode of performance.

Spinal Tap's generic gallop through 1960s pop stylings is grounded in the text through the notion that the band members are fickle, and lack any genuine investment in the music that they play. This is most focused in their performance of heavy metal. *This is Spinal Tap* was released in 1984 at a point when heavy metal was a strong mainstream musical force, but when the outlandish attire, excessive makeup and occultist and mystical subject matter were starting to appear clichéd. *Spinal Tap* engages with these clichés of heavy metal spectacle, referencing as many as possible by highlighting the band's attempts to embody all of these aspects at once, stripping away any nuance that might exist within the heavy metal community. Spinal Tap's pastiche of heavy metal is rendered in *This is Spinal Tap*'s parody of heavy metal.

The opening live performance of the tautologically titled 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight' is key to establishing the tone of the film. The band is introduced to the stage, and the film, by the New York MC (Patrick Maher), who makes the 'devil horns' sign with his hands, whilst describing the band as coming 'direct from Hell'. The camera pans up to reveal a giant, horned skull suspended above the stage. When the band members take the stage, their clothes cite numerous heavy metal and hard rock traditions. St Hubbins and Tufnel are clothed in tight spandex (Led Zeppelin, Van Halen, Saxon, Queen) which allows 'greater freedom of movement on stage and better display of the athletic bodies of the performers, thereby promoting an image of vital power' (Weinstein 1991: 30). In contrast, Smalls is dressed in leather and chains (Judas Priest, Motörhead, Iron Maiden), allying himself with a different generic subculture.

This lack of unity in heavy metal attire suggests that they are just paying lip service to the iconography of heavy metal rather than genuinely investing in it (it also, of course, allows Reiner and company to parody a much wider range of heavy metal images). A prime example of this shallow engagement with heavy metal culture is the incongruous umlaut that floats over the 'n' of Spinal Tap's logo. Umlauts, used extravagantly, can be found throughout heavy metal, the two most famous probably being in the names of Blue Öyster Cult and Motörhead. However, an umlaut has

no business being anywhere near a letter 'n'; it is there purely because the band think that it *should* be there as part of their attempt to conform to heavy metal conventions.

The band is also woefully unfamiliar with the boundaries of the genre, and so are unable to recognise when their actions become inappropriate. This is most clearly demonstrated by the debacle surrounding the cover for the *Smell the Glove* album. Tufnel and St Hubbins cannot understand why the album sleeve, which depicts 'a greased naked woman […] on all fours […] with a dog collar around her neck […] and a leash […] and a man's arm […] pushing a black glove in her face to sniff it', is inappropriate, because of its overt sexism—'What's wrong with being sexy?' Tufnel asks—when the artwork of a similar band, which reverses the misogyny by depicting the male singer being tortured by women, is seen as acceptable. As St Hubbins notes with disappointment, 'it's such a fine line between stupid and clever'. In Spinal Tap's case it is a line that exists in a perpetually porous state because of their lack of self-awareness. The album is ultimately released with an entirely black sleeve.

Spinal Tap invest heavily in two of heavy metal's central aspects: a focus on masculinity and grand displays of volume and power.[4] With

> power […] 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. (Plantinga 2003: 156)

Spinal Tap's members are keenly aware of this aspect of heavy metal culture, hence Tufnel titling his 'Mach' piece 'Lick My Love Pump', and his attempts to display his guitar-playing skills through exuberant solos. Smalls conceals a cucumber inside his trousers in an attempt to enhance his masculinity, and the 'Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight' number features a moment where the three guitarists perform the posturing of heavy metal by aiming their phallic guitars at the crowd, staccato fingering suggesting the sound of machine-gun fire, a reference to the music video for the Judas Priest single 'Breakin' the Law', which also works as an example of Carroll's 'mimed metaphor' sight gag, where 'the audience is invited through the prompting gesticulations of the mime to consider objects under alternative interpretations' (1991: 31–32).

Spinal Tap's attempt at heavy metal is almost completely constructed through a performance which highlights the implicit understanding that the level of visible masculinity required to be successful as a heavy metal

artist is so unnaturally heightened that it *has* to be performed. However, because Tap are ill-equipped to fully invest in the performance of 'heavy metal' to the standards of genuine heavy metal bands, humour comes from the usurping of this performed masculinity, with 'Spinal Tap's pathetic reality [contrasting] with these delusions of mastery and grandiosity' (Plantinga 2003: 156), and the performances that underpin them are revealed: Tufnel's solos are extended dirges *not* displays of virtuosity; Smalls' foil-wrapped cucumber is exposed by an airport metal detector.

Spinal Tap's relationship with volume is equally contrived. Throughout the film the notion that '[l]oudness contributes to an ethos of power and intensity' (ibid.) is repeatedly mocked. The song 'Big Bottom', which is played on three bass guitars (one of which is double-necked), and Tufnel's possession of an amp which 'goes up to eleven' are particularly important in this regard. Seemingly working under the misapprehension that being the loudest will automatically make them the greatest, the members of Spinal Tap pursue volume to an excessive extent. This notion of being 'one louder' links heavy metal and parody, and Spinal Tap/*Spinal Tap* amplifies the iconography of heavy metal to absurd proportions. For Carl Plantinga, 'heavy metal is not qualitatively different than mainstream rock music; it is simply more extreme' (ibid.: 155). The same is true of the parodic technique of exaggeration which 'functions by targeting lexical, syntactic and stylistic elements of the prototext and extending them beyond their conventionally expected limits' (Harries 2000: 83). *This is Spinal Tap* moves from being heavy metal to a parody of heavy metal when the already exaggerated sonic and aesthetic elements that characterise heavy metal itself are turned up to eleven.

Spinal Tap's performance of heavy metal, complete with masculine posturing, shouts of 'Rock and Roll!', mugging at the camera and contorted faces during extended and self-indulgent guitar solos, is significant because it reveals both Spinal Tap, and heavy metal itself, to be the product of extended performance. This is highlighted when the band get lost backstage before their Cleveland show. The 'going on stage' moment is a significant rock-documentary trope, signalling the rock star's transition from off-stage to on-stage performer. In *Dont Look Back*, several lengthy tracking shots follow Dylan from the off-stage space of the dressing room to the on-stage space of the concert hall, moving from the version of himself enacted for Pennebaker's camera to the one designed to please a large, paying audience. In Cleveland, Spinal Tap find themselves lost backstage, stuck in a transitional limbo between dressing room and stage in a kind of

rock and roll purgatory which reaches a succession of literal dead ends. Rather than forming part of a dramatic stage entrance, Smalls's charismatic exclamations of 'Hello Cleveland!' are instead wasted on a single, uninterested boiler room attendant (Wonderful Smith). The sequence stretches out the 'going on stage' moment and in so doing reveals the contrived nature of the on-stage performances by all rock stars by highlighting how ridiculous this posturing is without an audience to witness it.

Although the film suggests that Spinal Tap is a 'bad' heavy metal band, with 'the satire [foregrounding] the incongruity between the music and its presentation' (Plantinga 2003: 157), it is implicit that the filmmakers themselves have a soft spot for the genre even if they do consider straight heavy metal to be amusing in and of itself. Therefore, whilst we are invited to compare Spinal Tap unfavourably with the real heavy metal bands that they imitate, we are also left with the suggestion that the targets are themselves not entirely straight; whilst heavy metal culture is a serious business to those involved, to an outsider it can swiftly descend into the realm of self-parody.

The film collapses the gap between the real and the fake, even as it separates the band from those it imitates. Spinal Tap's ability to change from one style to another is a significant part of this porosity, because it reveals that all of the supposedly genuine musical modes that are emulated are nothing but performances to begin with. That these real performances are often rendered familiar to us through non-fiction or documentary modes of representation—which are themselves performative—only problematises the notion of a coherent 'real' further. Spinal Tap is not notably different to any other rock band, and is, as with all musicians who adopt a stylised image, the result of a series of choices of the kind of performance mode, costume and attitude that Byrne identifies. British-invasion pop contains just as many levels of performance, contrivance and mannerism as psychedelic rock and heavy metal, though heavy metal requires a more *extreme* performance. It is for this reason that having seen *Spinal Tap*—where these performances are made visible through a series of comic images that exaggerate documentary 'reality'—it is difficult to return to *The Last Waltz* and other earlier rock-documentaries, without our understanding of them having been altered by *Spinal Tap*. The mask has been pulled away and the performances on which they are founded have been unveiled. Ironically, this is precisely the aspect that straight documentaries strive for, but more often than not fail to achieve.

This notion that Spinal Tap is not notably different to its parodic targets clearly problematises its relationship with Butler's notion of 'realness'. Although we can read Spinal Tap as a series of performances that do not 'pass' as real, the same can be argued of the various heavy metal, psychedelic rock and British invasion bands which are imitated. As a result, the gap between real and fake becomes less clear, because the 'real' that is being emulated is already a performance that can be 'read'. *This is Spinal Tap* offers a performance of a performance. Even this extra level of performance does not necessarily separate Spinal Tap from genuine rock stars, particularly those who conform to genre stereotypes by adopting other artists' performance styles into their own star persona. Even more problematic are those stars who reinvent themselves and their image, especially if this involves adopting a stage persona. In this respect there seems to be very little distinguishing Spinal Tap from pop stars such as David Bowie, Bob Dylan or the Spice Girls, who all publicly perform 'characters'—Ziggy Stardust or Scary Spice for example—which move beyond the traditional modes of performance associated with the rock star. Is David Jones as David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust, performing in the glam rock mode, significantly different to Christopher Guest as Nigel Tufnel performing heavy metal? In this comparison, Tufnel might even be less performative than Bowie!

This transformation, from obviously fake to problematically real, becomes complete when we contemplate Spinal Tap's extra-diegetic presence. At the time of the original release of the film, few of the promotional materials overtly acknowledged its fictionality, cloaking 'the film's parodic nature […] and [referring] to the band as a "genuine" item' (Harries 2000: 29). However, in keeping with the film itself there are a number of hints suggesting that the film is not all that it appears: the incongruous umlaut; a poster which includes the humorous tagline, 'Does for rock and roll what *The Sound of Music* did for hills'; a TV spot which presents itself as a commercial for a Spinal Tap 'Best Of' collection which 'is not sold in any store […] nor through this special TV offer'. The only original promotional material that specifically signposts that *This is Spinal Tap* is a parody is a poster which features an electric guitar, it's neck twisted into a knot in a manner that suggests that the film is not to be taken seriously; it might look like a documentary, but it is reality gone awry. Harries (2000: 132) points out the poster's similarity to that of the parodic spoof *Airplane* (1980), where the plane itself is tied in knots. However, it also references the original posters for *A Hard Day's Night*, which also feature a knotted guitar and which provides another concrete link to *Spinal Tap*'s mockumentary heritage.

Spinal Tap's slippage between real and fake continues with their occasional live concerts, album releases and in-character interviews. It is now impossible to conceptualise Spinal Tap as *just* a fake band. The result is an even more complex relationship between fiction and reality, as two different versions of Spinal Tap seem to come into existence: a straightforwardly fictional version which formed 'in December 1966, crawling from the wreckage of the various incarnations of Originals, New Originals, Thamesmen, and Dutchmen' (French 2001: 119); and a more problematic version which formed as a fake band for the US programme *The TV Show* (1979), became the subject of the mockumentary film *This is Spinal Tap* and then went on to have an existence outside of that film. Where these two versions of Spinal Tap separate is unclear, as the in-character interviews and DVD commentaries become part of the extended fiction. This dialogue between a text and a fictional band which has continued to exist beyond the bounds of that text, complicates the status of the text.

Ethan de Seife suggests that

> The musical talent of the members of Spinal Tap is one of the principal reasons that the film is so successful: this *faux* band is better than many 'genuine' pop-metal bands […] a fact which very skilfully complicates the separation of documentary and fiction. (de Seife 2007: 3)

Christopher Guest notes that when playing live, '[t]he ultimate irony is that we are playing every note live and nearly all "real" bands are now using prerecorded DAT tapes' (Grant 2004: 31). That Spinal Tap is more authentic than many actual bands severely challenges the idea that they fail to 'pass' as real. If taken on their own terms, the film *This is Spinal Tap*, and the band embodied in it, can only be read as artifice. However, once we understand that Spinal Tap is not significantly less performative than the bands that it imitates, its artificial status becomes hard to countenance. Once the extra-textual and post-textual activity is taken into account, it is virtually impossible to conceptualise Spinal Tap as anything other than a 'real' band: you can buy the records and t-shirts and see them play live. In this respect the only significant difference between Spinal Tap and The Beatles is that whilst The Beatles began as musicians and then developed their personas as film stars and film characters, Spinal Tap have moved in the other direction.

Spinal Tap: Disrupting the Rockumentary Canon

Harry Shearer has noted that even though they had made a film about the various mishaps that could befall a band whilst on tour, that did not stop Spinal Tap repeating many of the experiences for real.[5] This is also a common experience of many so-called genuine bands, for whom Spinal Tap becomes a reference point around which they are able to comprehend their own experience (Getlen 2014). Guest recalls that the inspiration for the film came when he observed a British band in an LA hotel whose bass player had mislaid his instrument, possibly having left it at the airport (Bailey 2014). Such examples are numerous, but special mention must go to U2, who express a fundamental misreading of the film in their deliberate attempts to, in the words of their guitarist The Edge, 'outcool Spinal Tap' (Davis 2007: 20) on their Popmart Tour of the late 1990s. The combination of a smoke machine and the windless air in Las Vegas led to The Edge going 'one louder' than Spinal Tap by getting lost *on* stage, unable to find his guitar pedal (French 2001: 236–237). And in a scenario reminiscent of the malfunctioning space-pod which traps Derek Smalls during a performances of 'Rock and Roll Creation', U2's stage props included a giant lemon, which also malfunctioned, opening 'just enough so you could see our feet' (Davis 2007: 20).

The resonances between *This is Spinal Tap* and other documentary and mockumentary texts is pervasive, and as I have argued, to a great extent this is because *Spinal Tap* itself is almost entirely composed of sequences parodying or imitating other texts. By exposing the performative aspects of previous music performances, particularly those visible in documentary form, *Spinal Tap* changes our understanding of those texts. It is almost impossible to view them without seeing them in relation to *This is Spinal Tap*.

The Last Waltz—which chronicles the farewell concert of Canadian folk-rock group The Band—suffers particularly badly in this regard. In one sequence an overawed Martin Scorsese (who is also clearly the reference point for Marty DiBergi in *This is Spinal Tap*), asks guitarist Robbie Robertson whether he believes the concert to be an end or a beginning for The Band. Robertson's cryptic response is pompous in its attempted profundity: 'the concert is a celebration of the beginning of the beginning of the end of the beginning'. A similar conversation takes place during *Spinal Tap*'s subdued end of tour party, when St Hubbins is asked by a journalist (Zane Buzby) whether he believes that this could be Spinal Tap's 'last waltz'. 'Are we talking the end of Spinal Tap?' she

enquires. St Hubbins replicates Robertson's pretentious ineloquence: 'well, I don't really think that the end can be assessed as of itself as being the end', he says,

> because what does the end feel like? It's like when you try to extrapolate the end of the universe. If the universe is indeed infinite then what does that mean? How far is all the way? And then if it stops, what's stopping it? And what's behind what's stopping it? 'What's the end?' is my question to you.

Reiner transforms the fleeting moment from *The Last Waltz* into a reference point for *This is Spinal Tap*'s parodic humour, and the deliberate mention of a 'last waltz' makes Robertson's pretensions in the earlier film seem ridiculous. Having seen the parodic version, it is impossible to return to the original comments and take them with the profundity Robertson—and Scorsese—probably intended. As one reviewer on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) page for *The Last Waltz* suggests, '*Spinal Tap* […] skewered this movie and its flaws so completely that I cannot even look at the title without thinking of *Tap*' (McGrew 2004). The same is true of many of *Spinal Tap*'s parodic targets, and it is now virtually impossible to return to the mockumentary's precursors without viewing them through *Tap*-tinted glasses.

However, *Spinal Tap*'s impact is not limited to those music documentaries that preceded it. Given its precise, pervasive humour, and its popularity, many straight music documentaries made *since* its release have had to negotiate the pre-emptive challenge to their representational strategies posed by the mockumentary. Films such as *U2: Rattle and Hum* (1988), *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (2004) and *Anvil! The Story of Anvil* (2008)—all as definite about their subjects in their titles as *This is Spinal Tap* is—have a complex relationship with *Spinal Tap* at both a textual and perceptual level that means that the real documentaries appear to be critically aware of the shadow that lingers just over their shoulders. Sometimes this is directly addressed within the text: *Blur: No Distance Left to Run* (2010) opens with a slow tracking shot through a sparse recording studio, on the wall of which hangs a framed picture of Nigel Tufnel. Often it is left to the audience to join the dots, such as when Steve 'Lips' Kudlow and the improbably named Robb Reiner, the guitarist and drummer of Anvil, visit Stonehenge without a mention of Spinal Tap's deflating on-stage debacle with the ancient monolith.

This is Spinal Tap's impact is so significant that the negotiation of its challenge often becomes a deliberate strategy on the part of documentary filmmakers. *Anvil!* is the most obvious example of this approach, which is

visible in the film itself and in the para-textual material released alongside it. In one sequence, an interview takes place in a fast-food restaurant where Kudlow and Reiner discuss their childhood friendships and their first song (Fig. 3.3). This directly replicates an interview with Tufnel and St Hubbins from *Spinal Tap* in which they discuss exactly the same topics in a similar location (Fig. 3.4). In both scenes, the men perform *a cappella* versions of their turgid early efforts 'All the Way Home' (Spinal Tap) and 'Thumb

Fig. 3.3 Steve "Lips" Kudlow (left) and Robb Reiner (right) discuss their first song in *Anvil! The Story of Anvil* (2008) …

Fig. 3.4 … a scene apparently reperforming the sequence in *This is Spinal Tap* where David St Hubbins (left) and Nigel Tufnel (right) discuss the same

Hang' (Anvil) and the scenes highlight the generic 'sound' of first songs.[6] The replication of the earlier film's *mise en scène*—the glass-fronted counter, the menu board, the red sauce bottle, the plastic cups with straws, the framing—makes it seem impossible that the sequence in *Anvil!* could be anything other than a direct and deliberate re-creation of the scene from *This is Spinal Tap*. Indeed, this figurative mirroring is made literal by the arrangement of the protagonists within the frame. Whereas Tufnel and St Hubbins look across the frame from right to left, Kudlow and Reiner look right to left, a reversal that both references and skews the original. The supposedly straight documentary is borrowing from the fiction, the stream of parody appearing to flow in the wrong direction.

By creating a link between *Anvil!* and *This is Spinal Tap*, Anvil's status as a real band was frequently brought into question. The invisibility of a supposedly influential band from popular culture was a major issue, and mirrored the question 'why make a documentary about Spinal Tap?' with the question 'why make a documentary about Anvil?' That the drummer of Anvil was named Robb Reiner, but for an extra 'b' sharing his name with *Spinal Tap*'s director and co-star, seemed too huge a coincidence. Furthermore, Sacha Gervasi, *Anvil!*'s director, was not known as a documentary maker, having previously been the writer of the fiction film *The Terminal* (2004) and the mockumentary *The Big Tease* (1999).

The marketing campaign for *Anvil!* made a virtue of this connection with *Spinal Tap*, highlighting the links between the two films in order to diffuse some of this potential confusion and to draw in a greater audience. The programme notes for the film's screening at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival state that the style and tone 'may first lead you to think this a mockumentary, but it isn't' (Cooper 2008), explicitly stating the perceived need to address *Spinal Tap*'s lingering presence, and uphold the film's true nature as a straight documentary. The reviews quoted on the film's posters also enforce this complex relationship of both disavowal *and* alignment, with a quote from *Kerrang!* magazine suggesting that the film is '[t]he best rock 'n' roll movie since *Spinal Tap*' (Anon 2008), unwittingly invoking and updating the *Playboy* review of *Spinal Tap* which opened this chapter.

The press were also actively encouraged to make connections between the two films, linking them thematically and stylistically, but always reenforcing Anvil's status as a genuine band. As Gervasi suggests,

> the references to *Spinal Tap* we encouraged. Look, the drummer's named Robb Reiner, so you're fucked out of the gate. I just decided you know what we're going to do? We're going to embrace it and encourage the audience to believe that this is a jovial romp à la *Spinal Tap*. (Singer 2009)

The makers of *Anvil!* were, therefore, engaged in a very deliberate process through which the status of the classic mockumentary was invoked to sell the low-budget documentary. Indeed most of the press coverage of the film made reference to *Spinal Tap* at some point, as the following comments make clear:

> Nobody watching *Anvil: The Story of Anvil* [*sic*] will fail to pick up the nods, allusions and outright homages made to the greatest rockumentary of all time, *This is Spinal Tap*. (Quinn 2009)

> The obvious comparison is with *Spinal Tap*. The documentary is at least as funny as the cult metal spoof—and it's for real. (Idle 2009)

> *Tap* is the hard-rocking elephant in the living room that is never mentioned, though one brief shot of an amp going up to 11 coyly acknowledges the debt. (Bradshaw 2009)

The acknowledgement of the lingering uncertainty surrounding Anvil's ontological status suggests that it is impossible to view *Anvil!* without thinking of *This is Spinal Tap*. In some sense this is literally true as it is surely only due to *Spinal Tap*'s popularity that a documentary about Anvil could be seen to be financially viable in the first place, sold through its novelty status as the 'real' *Spinal Tap*.

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, *This is Spinal Tap* challenges the idea that there is a distinct separation between the real and the fake when it comes to the performative figure of the rock star. The notion that Anvil is the 'real' Spinal Tap, suggests that somehow Spinal Tap is the 'fake' Spinal Tap, an assertion that is not only nonsensical, but flawed at a fundamental level. Due to the performative nature of all rock music, Spinal Tap is no less real—especially at the point of recording albums and performing live—than the band's supposedly more real counterparts. *Spinal Tap*, therefore, poses a particularly incisive problem to the straight music

documentary, highlighting the performances apparent within them, but also the ease with which real and fake can become indistinguishable. It is particularly ironic that even though the footage of Kudlow playing the guitar with a vibrator predates *This is Spinal Tap*, the fact that many people will see it for the first time *after* having seen *Spinal Tap* means that it looks like *Anvil!* is reperforming the mockumentary and not the other way around. This is because *Spinal Tap* is constructed through the reperformance of specific generic documentary styles and rock-documentary conventions. Ironically, the mockumentary has become the archetypal example of the rock-documentary. It is for this reason that many post-*Spinal Tap* rock-documentaries seem to imitate it, when they are merely continuing to enact a series of rock and roll performance styles which predate *Spinal Tap*'s parodic version. It is because of the mockumentary's position at the centre of the rock-documentary canon that these aspects seem ridiculous. However it is precisely this impact that makes *This is Spinal Tap* such an important text, because its familiarity changes the way we look at everything around it.

Notes

1. I am indebted to my copyeditor Eric Christianson for alerting me to the existence of this commercial.
2. It is possible that Rob Reiner directed the commercial, which would add an extra level of metatextuality to the joke. However, I have so far been unable to trace detailed production credits for the ad to either confirm or deny this possibility.
3. It may also be referencing the similarly untenable position of the keyboard player in The Grateful Dead.
4. This is another moment where it is worth reflecting on the masculine character of the mockumentary. Although *Spinal Tap* sends up one particular performance of masculinity, it does so through a process of cultural reference spotting and knowledge accumulation (of rock music, record collecting and music history) that has historically been associated with male attitudes, activities and cultures. That is not to say that women are excluded from such activities, but it has historically been the case that women are less likely to pursue such activities, thus potentially marginalising their participation.
5. Harry Shearer quoted in *The 50 Greatest Comedy Films* (2006).
6. On the subject of first songs, Stevie Jackson, the guitarist of the Glasgow indie band Belle and Sebastian, describes his first song as sounding 'uncannily similar to Spinal Tap's first effort', before acknowledging that that is 'probably what all first songs sound like' (Whitelaw 2005: 48).

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CHAPTER 4

Best in Show: Christopher Guest as a Mockumentary Auteur

Christopher Guest is inextricably linked to the mockumentary due to starring as Nigel Tufnel in *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), and directing four mockumentary feature films—*Waiting for Guffman* (1996), *Best in Show* (2000), *A Mighty Wind* (2003) and *Mascots* (2016)—and the television programme *Family Tree* (2013). Guest does not work exclusively within the format. His films *The Big Picture* (1989) and *Almost Heroes* (1998) are not mockumentaries, and *For Your Consideration* (2006) is more akin to a standard fiction film than it is a mockumentary, though it features many of Guest's regular acting collaborators and continues to utilise the director's trademark style of improvised acting. Nevertheless, as a filmmaker he is frequently defined by this association.

This chapter highlights Guest's impact on the mockumentary by examining the unique way in which he uses documentary aesthetics for comic purposes, and argues for the consideration of Guest as a mockumentary auteur. Of particular importance is the consistent tone of Guest's films, which find humour in the 'realities' of the everyday lives of his characters by highlighting their flaws in a fond and empathetic way rather than through ridicule. Fred Willard, a comic actor who has appeared in all of Guest's mockumentaries has stated that his approach to performing in Guest's work is to '[b]e the character, and have your character's hopes and faults, and be as real as you can be' (Muir 2004: 84). Willard's statement tells us much about the qualities of Guest's films. As well as suggesting the types of characters that appear (those with 'hopes and faults'), the

R. Wallace, *Mockumentary Comedy*, Palgrave Studies in Comedy,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77848-8_4

statement also addresses Guest's mode of improvised acting ('be the character') and the comic tone of the films he makes ('be as real as you can be'). This relationship between reality and comedy is, unsurprisingly, central to Guest's work, given that he believes that 'good comedy […] features a basis in reality and then "goes one step further"' (Muir 2004: 3), or 'up to eleven' as Spinal Tap's Nigel Tufnel might have it. In this sense, his directorial work has a natural affinity with *This is Spinal Tap*, where much of the comedy is grounded in reality, before moving towards the absurd. The mockumentary form plays a part in this, with this 'one step further' usually taking the form of humorous content that moves beyond, and in contrast to, the expectations of 'reality' suggested by the documentary-like style.

Many of the familiar characteristics of Guest's work take their cues from documentary's implied indexical link with the 'real', and extend them beyond the ordinary, initiating a shift away from a direct relationship with documentary, both tonally and aesthetically, in the process. Like *Spinal Tap*, Guest mixes a number of different documentary modes, brought together because they function as a generic shorthand of what people understand documentary to look like rather than through a desire to accurately replicate documentary form. Whilst observational sequences rarely mix with direct-to-camera interviews and archival footage in real documentaries, it is precisely these elements that signify to a general audience that what they are watching is 'documentary' material. It is somewhat ironic that this abundance of different documentary modes has become the standard aesthetic of the mockumentary. The form, therefore, utilises '"false" signifiers of reality' (Springer and Rhodes 2006: 8) to forge a clear link with documentary, without necessarily having any direct critical or reflexive engagement with it. Documentary techniques such as hand-held shooting or direct-to-camera interviews are not always being copied in order to demonstrate the ease with which such aspects of documentary style can be fabricated. Instead they are used because they signify the broad brushstrokes of documentary which allow Guest's particular type of comedy to function.

This mixed documentary style predates *Tap* and it can, for example, be found in *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash* (1978) and Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run* (1969). However, it is Guest who has mastered the aesthetic, by consolidating the form as a mode of filmmaking separate from documentary. This chapter demonstrates how these stylistic features have become self-referential aspects of Guest's mockumentary comedy and no

longer have a direct link to documentary filmmaking proper. This is another factor that defines Guest as an auteur who uses a mockumentary mode of expression because the use of non-fiction style can heighten the comedy rather than because he is necessarily interested in documentary itself. As Jason Middleton argues, by defamiliarising 'conventions that contribute to traditional claims of objectivity and transparency', Guest 'unlocks comic potentials in documentary form' (2014: 29). In this way, Guest has created a body of work which is defined, in part, through this movement away from direct association with the documentary image, establishing a tone and visual style that makes his films recognisable in their own right as 'Christopher Guest mockumentaries'.

Guest's work has been virtually ignored in academic terms. John Kenneth Muir has written the only book-length study of the filmmaker, a biographical, anecdotal account of the making of his films, and Guest's work has been briefly considered in Middleton's work on documentary and comedy (2002, 2014). This chapter is, therefore, partly an attempt to remedy this situation. In particular, I will examine *A Mighty Wind*, Guest's third foray into the mockumentary form, to suggest some of the ways in which his work has become central to the contemporary mockumentary. Key to this is repetition, familiarity and intertextuality, and a notable shift that can be observed within each film, across Guest's body of work as a whole, and indeed within the mockumentary form's recent development more generally, from a visual style directly tied to documentary, to one more akin to traditional modes of fiction filmmaking, creating a stand-alone hybrid form that does not rely on its relationship with documentary for its effect. *A Mighty Wind* is a particularly useful object of study in this regard as this is where this aesthetic trajectory comes most clearly into focus. Guest's return to the music film ties *A Mighty Wind* directly to *This is Spinal Tap* and *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), bringing the aspects of intertextuality and familiarity to the forefront.

Intertextuality

Featuring a recurring troupe of performers, most of whom emerged from various television and theatre comedy groups, such as National Lampoon, *Saturday Night Live* (1975–) or Chicago's Second City, Guest's films are improvised around a series of scenes, loosely outlined beforehand by Guest and frequent collaborators Eugene Levy (on *Guffman*, *Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind*) and Jim Piddock (on *Family Tree* and *Mascots*). Thomas

Doherty notes that, '[h]owever ragged and risky the improvisational method might seem, the bits and routines are buttressed by the sturdy pillars of a three-act structure—assembly, rehearsal, and show' (2003: 23). This is, of course, a classic fictional narrative structure, particularly of the musical, and the 'build up to a performance' narrative is also common in mockumentary comedy apart from Guest's work. It can be found in *A Hard Day's Night*, but also in *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1999), about a beauty pageant murderer, *The Big Tease* (1999), about a hair-dressing competition and *The Independent* (2000), which revolves around a retrospective of the work of a B-movie film director (Jerry Stiller). A significant number of straight documentaries also exhibit a similar narrative drive, so as well as referencing a standard mockumentary narrative trope, Guest's films also seem to be satirising the 'crisis structure' (Mamber 1972) of observational documentary. This 'comforting, almost predictable structure' (Muir 2004: 8) binds Guest's three mockumentaries together, highlighting the repetitive, familiar nature of his films, whilst drawing our attention towards character.

A Mighty Wind concerns the staging of a memorial concert for 'legendary' folk music impresario Irving Steinbloom (Jim Moret). The 'assembly' part of the narrative follows his son Jonathan's (Bob Balaban) attempts to coax his father's three most famous acts out of retirement (and obscurity). The Folksmen—Alan Barrows (Christopher Guest), Jerry Palter (Michael McKean) and Mark Shubb (Harry Shearer)—are a now-disbanded folk trio, famous in the mid-1960s for their hit 'Old Joe's Place'. The New Main Street Singers are an up-tempo 'neuftet' renowned for their rapid turnover of members and for playing watered down folk-pop. The third act is Mitch (Eugene Levy) and Mickey (Catherine O'Hara), a troubled male/female duo in the vein of Sonny and Cher, Ike and Tina Turner, and Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. They are most remembered for their song 'A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow', which, when performed live, always saw the couple share a kiss during the song's climax. The duo has not played in public since their break-up (and Mitch's breakdown) in the 1970s.

Once Steinbloom has convinced the acts to perform, the 'rehearsal' period begins and we see the groups reacquainting themselves with their old material. Finally the 'show' takes place in New York's Town Hall with a simultaneous television broadcast on the fictional Public Broadcasting Network (PBN). This narrative mirrors those of *Waiting for Guffman*, where the 'show' is an amateur musical, *Best In Show*, about the Mayflower Kennel Club's annual Dog Show and *Mascots*, which examines the World

Mascot Association championships. This narrative repetition and the focus on comedy encourage us to view these films as fictions. It also embodies a separation from the entanglement with straight documentary. It is perhaps for this reason that Roscoe and Hight (2001) have difficulty dealing with comic mockumentary texts that don't initially appear to be working to critique the straight documentary form. Guest *is* interested in documentary, but only in terms of the ways he can use the form for comedy, and it is important that as viewers we laugh along with the films, and not at them, as we might if we believed these characters to be genuine.

As Guest has noted, his films are 'more conventional' (Muir 2004: 92) than *Spinal Tap*, and the eschewing of an on-screen interviewer aligns his films more closely to traditional forms of fiction filmmaking. Harry Shearer, another of Guest's regular collaborators, suggests that Guest 'has been moving away from the stricter fealty to pure documentary-style' by 'going into a hybrid form' (ibid.). It is because the mockumentary has become a commonplace media form since *Spinal Tap* that it is able to evolve into its own comic mode without the audience feeling lost at sea; we still recognise Guest's films as mockumentaries, even though with each successive film they look increasingly less documentary-like.

As Guest's work becomes increasingly divorced from the documentary form, so the sense of familiarity and intertextuality increases. This is most apparent in *A Mighty Wind*, and it is fitting that in a film which deals with recapturing past glories, a great deal of the pleasure for the spectator is derived from acknowledging the intertextual moments which bind Guest's films together into a cohesive unit with their own unique visual appearance and tone. The recurring cast of actors is particularly important in this regard, leading Kim Newman to suggest that at a fundamental level 'Guest's films basically involve roping in all of his friends to do schtick' (2004: 52). Part of the reason for our eager anticipation of a new Guest film relates to a predilection for familiarity, and a staggering twelve cast members appear in at least three of Guest's four mockumentary features.[1] It is particularly important that many of the intertextual references in the film are not with previous documentaries, but with previous mockumentaries, suggesting that this intertextuality could tentatively be said to have become a generic trait. The celebratory concert in which each artist takes a turn, before the whole ensemble performs together for one final number, has its roots in *The Last Waltz* (1978), where Dylan's 'I Shall Be Released' is performed by twenty-or-so musicians. However, the structure of the film as a whole has more in common with the 'arrive, rehearse, perform' narratives of *A Hard*

Day's Night, *Waiting for Guffman* and *Best in Show*. Indeed, both *A Mighty Wind* and *A Hard Day's Night* share the same moment of narrative disruption, with Mitch's pre-show disappearance directly reworking the sequence in which Ringo plays truant (see Chap. 2).

A Mighty Wind can also be said to remake aspects of *This is Spinal Tap*, with folk music taking the place of heavy metal. However, the relationship between the two films is much fonder and more deliberate than a simple retelling. Much of the pleasure of watching the sequences with The Folksmen is derived from the knowledge that they are played by Guest, McKean and Shearer, the men behind the wigs in *Spinal Tap*. *A Mighty Wind*'s funniest and warmest moments occur when we are in their company and are enjoying the pleasures of the familiar. So as with *Tap*, we get to see the spoof album covers and archival footage of the group in their younger days, we spend time with them rehearsing, and we also see Guest, McKean and Shearer producing the same kind of inane improvised banter that made St Hubbins, Tufnel and Smalls so compelling in *Spinal Tap*.

The pleasures of the familiar build throughout Guest's three films. A significant source of *Guffman*'s pleasure had been its newness and it set the agenda and tone for Guest's future work. Although clearly similar to many earlier examples of the form, it adopts a unique version of mockumentary style, and within Guest's canon it is by far the least polished, and the one that is most stylistically similar to genuine observational documentary (it may also be the funniest). Both *Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind* develop the style, but do so in a way that draws on the familiar. By *A Mighty Wind*, Guest's style has reached a pinnacle of slickness that is recognisable, and through which the pleasures of the familiar become most apparent. Unlike many earlier mockumentary texts, we are aware of what going to see a Guest mockumentary will involve, positioning him as a mockumentary auteur.

In this sense the intertextual elements of *A Mighty Wind* reach a high-point of familiarity for the mockumentary viewer. As well as replicating the experience of previous Guest films at the level of narrative, character and tone, it also responds to the weight of history, reworking numerous other documentary and mockumentary texts, as well as engaging in a *Spinal Tap*-esque exploration of pop music that is equally rewarding for fans of both folk music and *Spinal Tap*. It is perhaps as a result of this strong sense of the familiar within Guest's mockumentary work, that *For Your Consideration* (2006), the non-mockumentary film that he made between

A Mighty Wind and *Family Tree*, was met with a generally muted response. Although the film featured many of the same actors and Guest's favoured mode of improvisation, it continued his stylistic trajectory towards traditional modes of fiction filmmaking, forsaking the familiarity of the mockumentary aesthetic and dispensing with any recognisable documentary conventions beyond a hand-held camera, therefore removing a significant source of pleasure for the audience who went to see the film expecting 'more-of-the-same'.[2]

Character and Tone

Another aspect that plays a key role in the familiar pleasures of Guest's work is the particular tonal qualities that his films embody. Douglas Pye suggests that tone is a key aspect of 'the ways in which [a] film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs' (2007: 7). Tone is essential in defining the mood of a film and the way it addresses its audience. However, it is also important in establishing how the film approaches and presents its subject matter, the point of view that the film and filmmaker takes towards the characters, and the attitude of the audience towards these characters. Although these aspects of tone are interlinked, it is the latter two that I will spend most time addressing here.

Guest's films are marked out by their sympathetic characters, who are grounded in the mundane whilst going 'one step further'. This is central to the films' tonal qualities and by extension the mode of humour employed. All three films are interested in the unique foibles, flaws and quirks that characterise human nature and behaviour. As Shearer says, 'nothing is funnier than humans, and the way we actually behave. You don't need to dress it up or extend it with a lot of imaginary flights. You just need to be a good observer' (Muir 2004: 84). There are clear similarities with observational documentary filmmaking here. Although clearly an oversimplification, if, as Patricia Jaffe suggests, we are to take observational documentary as '*recording life as it exists at a particular moment before the camera*' (italics as original) (1965: 43), and these are, after all, the broad, familiar brushstrokes from which the mockumentary imitations gain their effect, then Guest's starting point of watching real people shares a similar initial idea, which is then further articulated by the improvised working methods employed by Guest on his films.

Doherty notes that 'Guest puts the ethos of *cinéma-vérité* to the methods of improvisational comedy: turn the camera on, and eventually, serendipitously, something funny will happen' (2003: 23). The formulation of such performances as serendipitous accidents is, of course, flawed, given that the performers are professional comics, trained in improvisation, and as such their ability to be funny on the spur of the moment is anything but surprising. On the contrary, it is a carefully planned part of the process. Nevertheless, it results in dialogue and movement that is entirely spontaneous and this is reflected in the camerawork and editing. The relationship between the actor and the camera in a Christopher Guest film is the inverse of that found in most fiction films, where all of the on- and off-screen processes (the acting, the lighting, the editing, the sound) are usually dictated by a specific camera set-up that only captures fragments of a performance. In contrast, the camerawork and editing in Guest's mockumentaries, as in observational documentaries, are dictated by the action before the camera, and since the performers are improvising in character between one another rather than 'at' the camera, the relationship between actor and camera is not as prescriptive as fiction films that adhere to Hollywood continuity systems.

The performances that emerge are the product of a deep understanding of character. The starting point on any Guest film (as it was with *Tap*) is for the performers to construct a detailed history for their characters. As Shearer notes, 'one of the first things we did [*with Spinal Tap*] was write the entire history of the band, and all of the members […] making sure we had a shared base of knowledge' (Muir 2004: 57). Therefore, although the performances might appear spontaneous, they come 'from a deep understanding of character and nuance' (ibid.: 66). The high shooting ratios of around ten to one, a quantity more in line with documentary than fiction filmmaking, necessarily means that a great deal of material is cut out of Guest's films (ibid.: 80). However, as Bob Balaban, one of Guest's regular actors, points out, '[e]verything that doesn't end up in the movie […] gets in anyway; it's part of the reality of the characters […] You just see this little tip of the iceberg of these characters that have lived a whole life' (ibid.: 82). Like the best observational documentaries, there is a sense that we are only peering into the lives of these characters at one specific moment.

Robert Abele notes that it is the 'expectation of adulation' that drives the characters in Guest's work (2006: 98). *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show* and *Mascots* highlight 'the wannabe's quest for fame' (Muir 2004: 2),

and *A Mighty Wind* details a group of musicians clinging to past glories. These are desires which can never be met, as the characters are ill-equipped to realise the dreams that they have for themselves. As Middleton notes, Guest's characters are all '*awkward people*' (italics as original) in that they 'exhibit qualities [such as] […] obstinacy, lack of adaptability to society [and] cluelessness about how others see them' (2014: 32). Like Nigel Tufnel, Guest's characters function in a similar way to Noël Carroll's 'monumentally unaware character' (1991: 30). Corky St Clair (Christopher Guest) in *Waiting for Guffman*, for example, treats the amateur musical he is directing in small-town Blaine, Missouri as if it is a Broadway show. In *A Mighty Wind*, The Folksmen and The New Main Street Singers share these failings, whilst Mitch's breakdown—which reflects the unsettled mental states of pop and rock musicians such as Brian Wilson (The Beach Boys), Peter Green (Fleetwood Mac) and Syd Barrett (Pink Floyd)—means that whilst he may once have been capable of greatness, this potential will remain unfulfilled.

Once again the comedy comes from taking ordinariness 'one step further'. Like *This is Spinal Tap*, the songs written for the film and performed by the fictional artists are not bad, just pedestrian, and are actually very close to most genuine generic folk music. As Kim Newman suggests, they are 'just exaggerated and double entendre-laden enough to be funny but remain convincingly ghastly' (2004: 52). Like Guest's other characters, The Folksmen embody the sense of being not-quite-good-enough. As Michael McKean suggests:

> The point […] was never that they couldn't play or that they were incompetent […] it was just that some of the choices they made were either pleasingly banal or just kind of clunky […] We weren't making bad musical choices so much as we were making choices that were true to sort of underdeveloped imaginations, or imaginations that stopped just short of the goal. (Bond 2003: 27)

Even though some of the music is not of the highest quality—The Folksmen's 'Barnyard Symphony' with its sing-along animal noises is particularly cringe-worthy—the musicians themselves are always trying their hardest to succeed. The comedy therefore stems from their various missteps in the honest pursuit of their goals. This makes them likeable; we recognise the flaws, and laugh at them, but see that through their perseverance and enjoyment their integrity remains mostly intact. This sympathetic treatment of the characters' dreams and failures lies at the heart of the tonal qualities that make Guest's films unique. In their brief discussion

of *Waiting for Guffman*, Roscoe and Hight suggest that the film works in a similar manner to the television docu-soap, as it is 'constructed as if a documentary film crew was dropped into Blaine to gain a slice-of-life look or exposé of small-town America' (2001: 125). For the authors, all of the characters in *Guffman* 'appear in the same terms as the minor "stars" that are constructed within docu-soap' as they 'are seemingly unaware of how they appear, and that their shortcomings are being exploited for the purposes of entertainment' (ibid.). This mirrors Middleton's assertion that Guest's films 'construct a differential in perception […] between how we view [the characters] and how they view themselves' (2014: 32). However, Roscoe and Hight's conclusion that the characters 'are largely reduced to subjects of voyeuristic spectacle' (2001: 126) seems overly harsh on Guest's work.

It is true that most of the humour in these film stems from the low intelligence or witlessness of the characters, combined with an overinflated view of their abilities. For example, we laugh at *A Mighty Wind*'s Jonathan Steinbloom because he does not have the imagination to comprehend that the giant two-dimensional stage props manufactured by a professional production designer for the live show will look three-dimensional from the perspective of the audience. Similarly, the loud-mouthed wannabe-comic and manager of The New Main Street Singers, Mike LaFontaine (Fred Willard), is funny because he believes himself to be more famous than he really is. His introductory piece-to-camera is composed almost entirely of meaningless catchphrases—'Hey! Wha' happened?!', 'I got a weal wed wagon', 'I don't think so!'—culled from an ill-fated sitcom called *Wha' Happened!*, that he believes the audience has a fondness for, but which was never successful enough to enter the popular consciousness. However, 'the starry-eyed characters […] are treated with humor and empathy, never contempt', and there is something 'disquietingly human, and therefore touching' (Muir 2004: 3) about Steinbloom's nervousness and LaFontaine's lack of self-awareness. The humour is affectionate rather than mean, in part, because of their almost childlike naivety, which lends their actions a harmless innocence. Unlike a character such as *The Office*'s (2001–2003) David Brent (Ricky Gervais), whose cruel practical jokes, 'laddy' banter and poor management style has a profoundly negative effect on those who work for him, the lack of self-awareness exhibited by Guest's characters affect only themselves, and so functions as affectionate tragedy, rather than comic cruelty.

Again, comparisons can be made with observational documentary's treatment of its subject matter. Whilst the voyeuristic potential of the form could have opened the filmmakers up to criticisms of being exploitative, Jonathan B. Vogels notes in relation to the Maysles brothers that they avoid such charges because they were 'sensitive towards and respected their subject' and as a result they 'ennoble rather than degrade' (2005: 15) them. There is a tonal link between Guest's films and observational documentary because of their similar points of view towards their human subjects. That does not mean, however, that they are tonally the same. Guest's films are funny, while the Maysles brothers' films, especially *Salesman* (1968), border on the tragic, though the line is a fine one and there are moments when it is crossed in the work of both filmmakers.

The tonal qualities of Guest's mockumentaries do not just stem from the comic mismatch between ambition and execution, but from the energy expended, and satisfaction gained, in the pursuit of a perfection that can never be reached. The humour is both funny and touching, because we recognise the imminent failures, but also because we empathise with the idea that the characters have tried their hardest to make the best of everything. Steinbloom is the kind of character who is 'in charge of something they [know] absolutely nothing about, and yet [is] very controlling' (Muir 2004: 166), and his anxiety and overzealous attitude towards health and safety make him a ridiculous and frustrating man to work with. However, we recognise that these flaws emerge from his desire to make the stage set-dressing look as good as possible to adequately honour his father's memory. As Balaban suggests,

> I think some of the sweetness of these movies comes from the naivete of the characters […] Most of them are somewhat misguided. They are trying to do something that they don't really know how to do, or they're doing it in a way that won't quite get them what they want. But there's something very endearing about it. (Ibid.: 4)

This approach ensures that we care about what happens to these characters. All of Guest's films address this desire by concluding with short codas which take place several months after the end of the main action, allowing the characters time to reflect on their relative successes and failures, and provide upbeat resolutions for scenarios that had the potential to play out as a tragic mismatch of ambition and ability. In *A Mighty Wind*'s coda, for example, LaFontaine has successfully pitched a sitcom featuring

The New Main Street Singers, Mickey is delighted to be 'a musician again', even though this involves singing promotional songs for Sure-Flo (her husband's [Jim Piddock] catheter business), Mitch is writing poetry again, and The Folksmen's career has been revitalised by a low-key residential deal at a New York casino. The coda reiterates the film's warm tone, and, as Muir argues, '[i]f Guest were indeed mocking his characters […] this coda would be totally superfluous because audiences wouldn't care […] what happened to the protagonists' (2004: 8). The coda reveals that the characters are happy, that they have begun to accept their actual level of talent and that they have learned positively from their experiences.

Aesthetic Shift

As suggested in this chapter's introduction, one of the most recognisable attributes of Guest's work is the aesthetic shift that takes places across the duration of each of his films, and across his filmography as a whole. All four features have an overt aesthetic structure in which their fictional status is set up very clearly in the opening moments. They then settle into more recognisably documentary-style modes of comic representation, before gradually moving towards a visual aesthetic closely aligned with traditional fiction filmmaking. This slippage is fluid and is not explicitly signposted to the audience, but is a clear marker of Guest's work.

The initial moments of explicit fictionality are always absurdly comic gags, conveyed through familiar patterns of documentary shooting and editing, and designed to sever the link between the documentary-like image and the fictional content. *This is Spinal Tap*'s 'dust for vomit' sequence is one example (see Chap. 3), and Paul Ward describes such moments as examples of 'logical absurdity' that involve 'a sudden incursion of something that ruptures the verisimilitude and creates incongruity' (2005: 70). In the observational documentary-style opening sequence of *Waiting For Guffman*, whip-pans, crash zooms and unsteady camerawork are used to comic effect to highlight the absurdity of a small-town councillor's suggestion that the only way to ensure that an upcoming pageant goes off safely is to strategically place snipers on various roofs around the town. The 'documentary' camera responds to the suggestion by mirroring the audience's surprise, and the stylistic gesture of a sudden pause and reactive reverse pan 'double-take' would be jarring if found in a traditional fiction film. Similarly, our expectations of the talking heads interview are subverted in *Best in Show* when Gerry Fleck (Eugene Levy) is introduced. Speaking direct-to-camera,

Fleck remembers meeting his wife Cookie (Catherine O'Hara) at a high school dance, and how he was reluctant to take to the floor, due to having 'two left feet'. We assume he means this metaphorically, but the 'documentary' camera turns the sober form on its head through a process of parodic lateralisation (Harries 2000: 71–76) as it pans down to reveal that Gerry's lack of dancing ability is the result of his literally having two left feet due to a birth defect.

These sequences are not intrusive, and work within the overall texture of the films' comedy. As David Ansen, writing for *Newsweek*, notes, 'Guest seems to know just how far he can stretch reality without losing the crucial texture of verisimilitude' (2000). Though Fleck's two left feet and Blaine's trigger-happy security advisor *do* move beyond the believable, they do not stretch the credibility of Guest's mockumentary world, which already exists in a state that is like documentary but 'one louder'. In this regard, Guest's logically absurd moments conform to Jerry Palmer's conceptualisation of a joke as involving a surprise contained in a move from the plausible to the implausible (1987: 55–56, 69–70). This progression from the believable/plausible to the absurd/implausible occurs almost imperceptibly. The gradual ramping-up of the comedy draws us in, unwittingly, and as viewers we don't realise that the situation has reached absurd proportions until the final punch-line highlights how far removed from reality the situation has become. This comic formula is replicated throughout Guest's work to the point that it becomes an aspect of audience anticipation. It is therefore telling that during the climax of Mitch and Mickey's narrative in *A Mighty Wind*, the live performance of 'Kiss at the End of the Rainbow', the anticipated punch-line never arrives. Rather than a moment of heightened comedy, we are instead treated to a rather sweet, irony-free song that plays up the film's dramatic aspects rather than its comic manipulation of documentary, symptomatic of the transition evident within Guest's work at a macro level.

Apart from these overstated comedic signposts, the early portions of Guest's films focus on the detailed documentary-like construction of believable (but comic) worlds, characters and narratives. *A Mighty Wind* opens with a news report of Irving Steinbloom's death, suggesting that the events of the film have a wider impact for the world-at-large outside of the film. The majority of the characters are introduced through a combination of talking-head interviews and observational footage. Jonathan Steinbloom is first seen walking down a hallway as he negotiates with one of the acts on the phone, the observational-style hand-held camera trailing him as he

walks past his secretary and into his office, referencing the observational documentary technique of the lengthy tracking shot evident in *Primary* (1960), *Dont Look Back* (1967) and *Salesman*, and parodied when Spinal Tap gets lost backstage (see Chap. 3). This is followed by Steinbloom's first direct-to-camera interview. The first time we see The Folksmen in the present day is via observational footage of the band members talking at a barbeque, a scene once again followed by direct-to-camera interviews. This is a standard structuring technique to introduce almost all of Guest's major characters in his four mockumentary films, that suggests an indexical link to the 'real world' through the association with the rhetoric of documentary conventions; this is also, of course, a very traditional way of introducing subjects in straight documentaries.

The use of archival materials is also important to establishing the underlying reality of the world inhabited by the characters. The opening news report includes a series of archival clips, most of which are fake, though some may be genuine stock footage, of various folk bands performing. These include footage of Mitch and Mickey and The Folksmen, who are seen performing 'Old Joe's Place' in a clip from a 1965 episode of the fake television show *Hoot Nite*, another affectionate nod to the way in which Spinal Tap are introduced in the earlier film. As the trio describe the history of the group, their account is illustrated with numerous historical images: Shubb and Barrows in their first group, The Twobadors; all three band members signing their contract with Irving Steinbloom and Folktown Records; and the covers of their albums *Singin'*, *Wishin'* and *Pickin'*. We also hear The Folksmen's 'Old Joe's Place', The Main Street Singers' 'The Good Book Song' (alongside the cover of their album *Strolling Down Main Street*) and Mitch and Mickey's 'When You're Next to Me', accompanied by the *Meet Mitch & Mickey* album cover which directly parodies the cover of *Meet the Beatles*, the band's first US album for Capitol Records.

These archival inserts serve a dual, paradoxical, function, 'bolster[ing] [the film's] sense of reality' (Muir 2004: 116), yet comically puncturing the documentary image at the same time, through its own representational techniques. Muir asserts that 'these archival documents usually arrive in the first third of [Guest's] films—often in a flurry' (ibid.), and the bombardment of images stimulates a kind of sensory comic overload, breaking any illusion that what we are watching might be a genuine documentary, even as it enhances the personal histories of the characters on display by placing them within a documentary space. The parodic album covers are

funny, and thus highlight the fictionality, yet they also establish a credible back-story for each band. This dual function is made possible by the use of documentary conventions, where the cutting-in of archival evidence to support (or undermine) spoken testimony is an accepted technique. As Stella Bruzzi notes, archival footage has 'primarily been used in one of two ways' in documentary cinema: 'illustratively, as part of a historical exposition to complement other elements such as interviews and voice-over; or critically, as part of a more politicised historical argument or debate' where competing images raise complex reflexive questions about the nature of documentary testimony (2006: 26). Guest frequently subverts these formal traditions by cutting in material which works instead to undermine the verbal testimony in a comic way. His work is inherently reflexive at such moments through the 'laying bare of documentary conventions', which in the straight documentary are 'supposed to be essentially indiscernible to the viewer' (Middleton 2014: 30, 33). A particularly broad example in *A Mighty Wind* occurs when LaFontaine's statement that his cancelled sitcom became a cult show is rendered false by a mocked-up *Variety* cover with the headline '"WHA' HAPPENED" DUMPED due to total lack of interest'. Here, the supporting visual evidence is aligned less with traditional documentary uses, and more with the type of comic sight gag that Carroll calls the 'switch image', where 'the image is given to the audience under one interpretation'—LaFontaine was in a successful sitcom—which is then 'subverted with the addition of subsequent information' (1991: 33)—the newspaper article reveals that he is deluded.

Guest does not use the familiarity of the documentary form in a reverential way during the opening moments of *A Mighty Wind*, but as a means of heightening the comedic potential evident in the disjuncture between style and content. Having aligned itself visually with the observational documentary mode as the camera pursues Steinbloom down the corridors of his office, the factual aesthetic begins to unravel during his first piece-to-camera, and as Middleton argues, the documentary 'syntax' is 'defamiliarized […] through its incongruous juxtaposition to the [film's] absurd subject matter' (2014: 30). We are told that Steinbloom's inherent nervousness stems from his overprotective mother, and that following his founding of the Jewish Children's Polo League at the age of twelve, she ensured that he was protected from injury by riding Shetland Ponies instead of horses. The image cuts from the interview with Steinbloom to grainy 8 mm home-movie footage of four boys in red uniforms riding around on tiny ponies, providing supporting visual evidence for Steinbloom's state-

ment. However, rather than upholding its credibility, the archival footage instead demonstrates that pony polo really does look as ridiculous as it sounds, and works as a visual punchline, rather than grounding it in plausibility. Ironically, such moments actually seem to work in opposition to 'switch image' gags in that the film shows us *exactly* that which is being described, rather than the expected subversion. This is repeated in a more extreme way when Steinbloom reveals that when he was a member of the chess team his mother forced him to wear a football helmet for protection (Fig. 4.1). Again it is the use of a historical artefact which extends the moment beyond credibility, and we are shown a photo of the helmeted Steinbloom, seated in front of a chess board, head bowed in concentration.

In both of these instances, documentary techniques are being used for comic purposes, the irony being that the visual artefacts, which in genuine non-fiction films usually add credence to verbal testimony, are here used to extend the absurdity of that testimony by visualising the ridiculous. Unlike the fake *Variety* cover that undermines LaFontaine's testimony, here the comedy comes from Steinbloom's childhood being rendered absurd by the self-same methods regularly employed in straight documentaries to *neutralise* extreme testimony by backing-up the claims with visual evidence. Paradoxically, the supporting images make Steinbloom's statements seem even more ridiculous, not more believable.

Fig. 4.1 Archival footage exacerbates the ridiculousness of narrated testimony in *A Mighty Wind*

The use of documentary techniques to achieve the opposite effect to that usually found in the straight documentary also extends to the editing. Following the photograph of the chess-helmet, Steinbloom continues: 'now who knows what she was thinking. Maybe she thought that we might have fallen maybe, and impaled our heads on a pointy bishop or something, I don't know.' The scene ends after a momentary pause. Middleton argues that 'as documentary viewers, we have been trained to expect profundity or significance from the last line of dialogue delivered before the cut' (2002: 58). However, whereas in a documentary such a cut might allow us to take stock of the testimony provided and consider how this alters our understanding of the events, here the editing continues to undermine such conventions. The final cut in this scene performs the same function as it might in a documentary, as it places an increased emphasis on the final spoken words. Unlike a straight documentary, however, we are left to consider a nonsensical proposition: that somebody felt that their child could be so badly injured during a game of chess that it was necessary to make them wear a helmet. Middleton calls this type of editing 'cutting on the absurd' (2002: 57), with the contrast between documentary expectation and comic delivery meaning that 'the absurdity […] resonates even more strongly', and the cut itself serves 'to render the last bit of dialogue as a punchline' (2002: 58).

Although Guest's creation of humour here relies upon an interest in the ways in which documentaries deploy visual evidence, this is exploited with the primary aim of comedy, not overt critique. Instead, he uses the fact that the inclusion of archival material is an accepted documentary technique as a means of extending the comedy by including absurdly funny visual evidence. These moments are at odds with our expectations of documentary because the absurd content is delivered to the audience through standard documentary conventions, which usually serve a serious rather than a comic function. Significantly, most of these jokes are funny because they *look* like documentary, not because they are commenting on factual forms at a more general level, though in making visible the conventions of documentary filmmaking they do carry out an inherently reflexive function.

The bombardment of historical artefacts that occurs during the first third of Guest's films correspond with the sections that look closest to genuine documentaries. Once each film has established to the audience that they are watching a fake documentary, these 'documentary' elements also begin to fall away. By their conclusions, all four films have undergone

a transition that moves them closer aesthetically to traditional Hollywood filmmaking, as Guest becomes more concerned with telling the story and exploring character. The move from direct imitation of documentary conventions towards more traditional forms of fiction filmmaking is gradual, and as with the slow ramping up of the comedy within a scene it may only by in hindsight that one realises that such an aesthetic transition has taken place. As the dramatic aspects of the story become the centre of the viewer's engagement, the documentary elements fall away, and although we continue to watch as if it is 'like a documentary', very few of the elements used earlier in the film to suggest that that is the case remain visible on screen.

As well as featuring the majority of the historical artefacts, the first half of Guest's films also contain the majority of the direct-to-camera interviews. The second half of the films are almost entirely structured around observing the action in a hand-held style, whilst concealing the mechanics of the filmmaking process, much like both observational documentary and classical Hollywood continuity systems. The fact that all four of Guest's mockumentaries conclude with a lengthy performance sequence further complicates the aesthetic, as the documentary mode changes once again. In *Guffman*, a concert-film style is adopted for the stage production, whilst *Best in Show*'s dog show replicates television coverage of events such as Crufts. The off-stage sequences retain the observational look, though the style becomes increasingly less documentary-like as the film progresses, often featuring multiple cameras organised within standard shot/reverse-shot editing patterns.

The climax of *A Mighty Wind* employs all of these styles. The concert itself is seen through a bricolage of aesthetic styles which includes the 'documentary' cameras, the televised PBN video feed, and more conventionally dramatic modes of presentation. Although the backstage sequences pay lip service to the suggestion that they are observational, this is little more than a token gesture and they more or less follow generic dramatic lines of storytelling and visual aesthetics. Our familiarity with Guest's work, however, means that we still accept that we are watching a mockumentary—and in particular a Christopher Guest mockumentary—because the openings have been so carefully constructed, and because we have followed this gradual shift across his oeuvre.

This aesthetic transition from direct imitation to loose resemblance of documentary can be found across Guest's filmography, but it is also emblematic of the development of mockumentary comedy more generally.

Take the Money and Run, *The Rutles* and *Spinal Tap* all engage with their documentary forerunners in a much more deliberate and detailed way than any of Christopher Guest's films, and across its duration *Waiting for Guffman* looks much more like a documentary than *A Mighty Wind* does. Indeed, after the first section of *A Mighty Wind*, even the supposedly observational sequences do not always look particularly documentary-like. The scene in which Mitch arrives in New York on a Greyhound Bus has almost no non-fictional elements to it, and is presented, complete with musical score, as if the folk-singer were a down-and-out cowboy arriving in a frontier town. It is the direct-to-camera interviews either side of this short two-shot scene which provide the stylistic context that upholds the idea that this could be non-fiction.

In *A Mighty Wind* the 'observational' camera itself seems to be treated entirely differently to Guest's previous films. Although in all of Guest's films the participants follow observational documentary conventions and rarely directly address the camera unless they are being interviewed, in *Guffman* and *Best in Show* there is a sense that the characters are aware of and influenced by its presence. In *A Mighty Wind* this does not seem to be the case and this is a vital component of the shift in Guest's work. The film continues to embody the mockumentary aesthetic, but the sense that there is actually a camera crew present during the observational sequences has been lessened. This has in turn become a standard characteristic of almost all recent television mockumentary comedies, as my discussions of *The Thick of It* (2005–2012) and *Veep* (2012–) in Chaps. 5 and 6 will suggest.

By the conclusion of *A Might Wind*, the style conforms closely to fictional conventions. This coincides with the climax of the most overtly romantic narrative in Guest's films, which is given so much weight that it takes precedence over the fake documentary aesthetic. Mitch and Mickey are backstage preparing for their set. Both the characters and the audience are tense, worried about how well the performance will go and whether the embers of their past relationship—both personal and professional—will be rekindled. Clearly flustered, Mitch tells Mickey that he is going to go outside for some air. The exchange takes place in the doorway of their dressing room and comprises a sequence of three shots: a wide shot which frames the couple; an approximately point-of-view shot from Mitch's position, looking down at Mickey, who is seated in front of her mirror; a return to the first shot as Mitch walks from the dressing room and climbs a flight of stairs in the background. The documentary aesthetic is present,

but loose, and in contrast to the long hand-held tracking shots which were liberally employed earlier in the film, the shaky camera does not follow Mitch up the stairs. Instead it pre-empts his movements and is waiting for him at the top of the stairs and pans left, remaining stationary (if still unsteady), as he walks away down a corridor. When we catch up with him at street level it is via a documentary-like twenty-six-second tracking shot, but this is immediately followed by a subjective point-of-view shot which closes in on a large video-screen billboard advertising Samsung products, complete with enhanced traffic-noise and distorted street-sound. The shot is unlike anything in Guest's previous mockumentaries and is entirely unconnected to documentary filmmaking. However, it is central to the dramatic narrative of the film as it exacerbates the audience's anxieties that Mitch might be on the verge of a second breakdown and abscond before he can take to the stage. The fragmentation of the documentary format is therefore initiated by the dramatic character-driven narrative of Mitch and Mickey's reunion performance.

Indeed, the way that the symbolic and performative act of the kiss during 'A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow' is depicted throughout the film is emblematic of this stylistic breakdown. We first see the song and the kiss performed near the start of the film, in an archival clip from *Lee Aikman's Folk Hour* in 1966; this is followed by folk music historian Martin Berg (Paul Benedict)—his name clearly a riff on Marty DiBergi/Martin Scorsese—describing the pop-cultural significance of the kiss in a piece-to-camera. Later, in an observational sequence, we watch the duo rehearsing the song, where they hesitate, before ultimately resisting the kiss, when they reach the significant part of the song. The climactic centre of the film is the song's final performance as part of the television broadcast, the drama hinging on whether the kiss will be performed or not, and the personal implications that this may or may not have for the couple. Although still conforming to the generic strictures of the concert film, this emotive, dramatic moment becomes divorced from the documentary style, and for the audience, the pleasures of watching the film are no longer to be found in its usurping of documentary conventions for comedy, but as a result of the unfolding narrative drama.

Tension builds as, backstage, the other groups hear the song being played through the PA system and start slowly making their way to the stage to watch the performance—'I wonder how they're gonna handle that?' Jerry Palter murmurs, mirroring the audience's curiosity, as he leaves the dressing room to watch from the wings. The kiss is the aesthetic shift in Guest's film in microcosm, moving from the direct archival footage of

Lee Aikman's Folk Hour, to the less direct, but still documentary-like, talking-head interview with Berg, to the token-observational rehearsal, and finally to the almost completely classically-structured dramatic conclusion of the final performance. It is the only song in the concert that we hear performed in its entirety, and although staying close to concert-film tradition, when the moment of the kiss arrives, the intensity of the momentary pause and awkward silence is highlighted by the cutting. Mitch opens his eyes wide, gesturing to Mickey, and the camera follows his line-of-sight, cutting to Mickey's reaction: she is looking away. Cutting back to Mitch, the singer makes a slight gesture towards his partner who slowly reciprocates and they kiss. The theatre audience applaud and the other band members at the side of the stage cheer. It is also a moment of intense relief for the film's audience, forming the conclusion to a character-driven dramatic subplot that has overtaken the visual style of the film and led it away from its documentary origins.

However, this shift away from the direct imitation of documentary *does not* mean a move away from the mockumentary. Instead it cements the mockumentary as existing apart from documentary filmmaking. We understand that *A Mighty Wind* is a mockumentary because we have seen the form's gradual progression away from an aesthetic directly tied to the documentary form (*Waiting for Guffman* and to a lesser extent *Best in Show*), to one that recognisably stands on its own. As Bruzzi notes, '[i]t would take a Martian who knows nothing about cinema and satire to now mistake *Spinal Tap* for an authentic documentary as the Guest "school" has become a significant comic sub-genre in itself' (2006: 189). Having experienced this almost imperceptible transition, we understand how the form has asserted its own identity as a fictional comic form that uses a loose documentary-like style to tell a story and be funny.

The comic mockumentary has become a fictional form that has much in common with traditional modes of Hollywood filmmaking, but which differentiates itself through the adoption of an aesthetic which uses aspects of documentary style, often applied in broad strokes, to accentuate the comedy by highlighting the absurdity that exists in certain areas of real life and in the behaviour of real people. By the finale of *A Mighty Wind*, Guest's mockumentary aesthetic has become increasingly removed from traditional modes of documentary filmmaking, but is recognisable in and of itself.

If we look outside of Guest's oeuvre, we can see these shifts replicated across the mockumentary form more generally, and specifically in the television mockumentary. Documentary remains an important touch-stone,

but there need not be any guarantee of a direct and sustained relationship with documentary within any individual mockumentary text. Instead, the mockumentary's relationship with documentary can be conceptualised as an ancestral one. Many of the current generation of mockumentary texts—particularly those which we might primarily recognise as sitcoms—derive their documentary-ness as much from their relationship with one another as they do from any exhaustive attempt to imitate straight documentary conventions.

Gerd Bayer argues that 'mockumentaries can claim their own heritage and therefore no longer feel required to signal to the audience their hybrid qualities' (2006: 175–176). This move towards becoming a recognisable mode is concomitant with the 'formation of an audience both trained in the generic tradition and its appropriate reception' (ibid.: 176). The notion that the mockumentary has become its own recognisable 'mode' of representation is compelling, even if its aesthetic identity is a fluid one. As the mockumentary has become more popular and more familiar, many of the stylistic elements that once formed a direct and tangible link to non-fiction texts—and here I include the explicit and sustained pretence of a diegetic camera crew—have dropped away. The direct link with documentary is an ever-weakening one in many mockumentary texts. Instead the media-literate audience recognises that the texts have strong *mockumentary* elements because we can trace—or have experienced first-hand—this development across time and between mockumentary texts.

To take a momentary detour, but one that puts Guest's work and influence into the wider context of the recent mockumentary field, we might think of the mockumentary sitcom *Modern Family* (2009–) which has elements that are documentary-like, though the programme's momentum as a sitcom overpowers these stylistic features. Furthermore, the premise that what we are seeing is a fictional documentary is not upheld in a strictly logical or meaningful way. The sitcom revolves around the three households that comprise the Pritchett family, at the centre of which is the patriarch Jay (Ed O'Neill) and his two adult children Claire (Julie Bowen) and Mitchell (Jesse Tyler). The series is structured as a traditional sitcom, with, at the time of writing, nine seasons of 22–24 half-hour episodes each.

What is clear from even a cursory viewing of any episode is that there are two fundamentally documentary-like characteristics of *Modern Family*'s style. The first is the regular and repeated use of talking-head interviews with the main characters, which demonstrate a direct address to

camera and in doing so explicitly acknowledge the presence of a filmmaker. The second aspect is the insistent hand-held style which, as in Guest's work, serves the dual function of enhancing the comedy while also acting as a constant reminder that we are supposed to view the events depicted as being captured spontaneously by an unidentified cameraperson. The hand-held style reflects the responsive stylistic tics of observational documentary, and the performances are imbued with a spontaneity by virtue of being captured in a way that appears unplanned, even if it may actually be heavily choreographed. Furthermore, comic developments, and particularly potential comic misunderstandings, are often articulated visually through camera movements and by zooming between planes of action, which draw the viewer's attention to important details within the *mise en scène* of which the characters themselves may not be aware. Thus, comedy is often created through the exploitation of shooting conventions that have become naturalised aspects of the mockumentary form such as whip pans, punch-ins and the not infrequent moments when a character deliberately directs a look to camera, something mastered by John Krasinski in his portrayal of Jim Halpert in the US version of *The Office* (2005–2013). The lack of non-diegetic music or an audience laughter track complete the aesthetic set-up.

Despite these aesthetic qualities, there is rarely a sense in *Modern Family* that the action that we are seeing depends on the presence of the film crew. Furthermore, *Modern Family*'s editing patterns reflect the snappy sitcom-style delivery and broad comic performances by breaking the spatial relationships between cameras. Although I will suggest in Chap. 6 that this in itself has become a well-established mockumentary convention, it is not a documentary one. In other words, it is really only the movement of the camera that is strictly documentary-like.

No explanation is given within the show as to who is filming the Pritchett and Dunphy families, nor the intended outcome of their filming. In this respect we can see how *Modern Family* epitomises the contemporary mockumentary form. Steve Levitan, the series' co-creator, has stated that the initial concept for the programme—eventually dropped—was that the family were being filmed by a Dutch documentary maker who had lived with the Pritchetts as an exchange student when he was younger (Buchanan 2015). Thus the adherence to documentary was stronger in conception than realisation, and the requirement to incorporate and explicitly acknowledge the documentary film crew was viewed as

an unnecessary burden on the show for very little comedic gain. Instead, the gestures towards documentary aesthetics are enough to convey *Modern Family*'s documentary-ness without the programme becoming a slave to the logics of documentary form.

Levitan describes the show as 'a family show done documentary-style' (Sepinwall 2010), and we can see that because the impetus of the show is comedy and not documentary critique, the veracity of the documentary infrastructure within the diegesis is a minor concern. This is characteristic of the contemporary mockumentary in both its comic and serious modes and I would argue that the programme represents the current extent of the form as it has developed in a popular televisual context. *Modern Family* does not look or behave like a real documentary. Rather it behaves like a mockumentary, and much of its style is distilled from previous shows, most notably, the US version of *The Office* and the work of Christopher Guest.

Returning to Guest's work, it is worth noting that the potentially complex or subversive aspects of the mockumentary form have not been dispensed with entirely. All of Guest's films adopt an ambivalent position towards their subject matter precisely because the chosen subjects are those with which Guest is familiar. As with *Spinal Tap*, we once again see the actors doing for real the thing that they are parodying, and it is difficult to call the performances in *A Mighty Wind* fake when the songs are written, arranged and performed by the actors themselves. Like Spinal Tap, the various groups have gone on to have extra-diegetic lives beyond the film. The Folksmen have actually existed as performers and stars of various comedy sketches since 1984 and are Spinal Tap's regular opening act whenever they play live. It is ironic, yet also fitting, that 'A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow' was nominated for an Academy Award, a clear acknowledgement of the high quality of the songwriting, and a decision made doubly complex by the fact that the song was performed by Levy and O'Hara at the awards ceremony in-character as Mitch and Mickey. This collision of the real and the fake increased the comic irony by making it unclear whether the Academy were honouring Mitch and Mickey's diegetic song, Michael McKean and Annette O'Toole's real-world songwriting, the performances of musicianship by Levy and O'Hara, or a combination of all three. It is unfortunate that the song did not win as it left hanging the question of which set of writers would have actually gone on stage to collect the award.

Conclusion

A Mighty Wind is significant for possessing a visual style and a mode of address that is simultaneously backward- and forward-looking. The removal of the diegetic documentary camera crew in the observational sequences anticipates similar developments in the television mockumentary. At the same time, it embodies a style similar to that utilised by Richard Lester on *A Hard Day's Night*. Although reminiscent of observational documentary, neither film is bound by that mode's strictures. For Lester, the result is a tightly scripted and performed film that retains the appearance of improvised spontaneity; it always looks a lot *like* a documentary even though we are aware that it is not. With *A Mighty Wind*, Guest has returned to a very similar place. The sequence of Mitch leaving the dressing room, and Mickey looking for him backstage look like a lot of scenes in *A Hard Day's Night*, particularly Ringo's walk along the canal bank, which have a documentary quality even if the use of point-of-view shots, dissolves, and dramatic editing conventions means that this emulation of documentary is only very loose in actuality. Both of these sequences also have an observational feel because of a sensibility accrued through the surrounding sequences. The same is true of Guest's work as a whole, where our understanding of how *A Mighty Wind* functions is inflected by the aesthetic and tone of his previous films. Guest, therefore, seems to have returned to an aesthetic mode of mockumentary filmmaking very similar to that initiated by Lester's work with The Beatles.

Where the two films separate is the way in which they incorporate the preceding history of the mockumentary form and the way in which audiences perceive them. Few people would argue with *A Mighty Wind*'s status as a mockumentary, whilst almost no criticism upholds *A Hard Day's Night* as a significant example of the form. Perhaps the main reason for this is the sense of history that drives *A Mighty Wind* that is only present within *A Hard Day's Night* in hindsight. *A Mighty Wind* stands as the apogee of Guest's development of the comic mockumentary on film, drawing on a timeline of particularly important touchstones in the music film and mockumentary genres: *A Hard Day's Night*, *Dont Look Back*, *The Last Waltz*, *The Rutles*, *This is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting For Guffman* and *Best in Show*. Although there is a cyclical style in place in which *A Mighty Wind* appears to have returned to the aesthetic of *A Hard Day's Night*, it has reached this position through a historical shift that has built up and then

broken the mockumentary's links with the documentary form, becoming a separate aesthetic entity in its own right, with its own series of attached pleasures; familiarity and repetition being key.

Many of these pleasures are embodied by, and have been honed within, the work of Christopher Guest, a filmmaker who is inherently aware of the history on which his films are founded and who incorporates this history as a central component of his films. *A Mighty Wind* announces itself as a mockumentary text with an attached pleasure system, and is aware of the history that that invokes. *A Hard Day's Night* does not and is not so aware. That does not preclude it from being considered a mockumentary, but it might explain why so far this has been the case. Guest's development as a filmmaker, from the rough documentary aesthetic of *Guffman*, to the slick, reflexive, and highly intertextual *A Mighty Wind*, reflects the development of mockumentary comedy as a whole, moving away from an explicitly documentary-like aesthetic towards a form of dramatic fiction filmmaking captured in a style that is now a separate entity in its own right; a shift also apparent in miniature within each of Guest's films.

Notes

1. These are Bob Balaban, Christopher Guest, Michael Hitchcock, Don Lake, Eugene Levy, Larry Miller, Catherine O'Hara, Parker Posey, Harry Shearer, Deborah Theaker, Fred Willard and Scott Williamson.
2. Conversely, it can be argued that the mediocre reviews for the 'greatest hits-like' *Mascots* were responding to *over-familiarity* and a sense of staleness within Guest's work.

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PART II

Politics

CHAPTER 5

'The Day the PM Joined *The Thick of It*': The Mockumentary and New Labour

So far in this book I have argued that mockumentary comedy makes visible the performative nature of the rock star by turning these performances into a major source of parodic comedy. In the previous chapter I also began to articulate some of the ways in which the mockumentary has become a recognisable audio-visual format in its own right, which has resonances with, but operates separately from, straight documentary forms.

This section of the book explores the ways in which the mockumentary has engaged in the business of politics and influenced the way we look at and understand the media representation of real politicians. The discussions that follow examine how two specific aspects of political media are approached by a range of mockumentary texts. In the book's final chapter, I examine the politician's performance of 'authenticity' and the intertwining of the political mockumentary within the emergent discourse of a 'post-truth' political culture. Of key concern here are the ways in which the television programmes *Tanner '88* (1988) and *Veep* (2012–) affect our understanding of the public images of genuine political figures such as Donald Trump (USA) and Nigel Farage (UK), who have attained popularity because of their projection of a sense of anti-establishment and anti-political 'authenticity' which is, paradoxically, highly stage-managed.

The current chapter focuses on the ways in which the mockumentary form has engaged with the New Labour government that led the UK between 1997–2010 through analyses of the political sitcom *The Thick of*

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It's (2005–2012) engagement with New Labour's culture of spin, and the work of photographer and programme-maker Alison Jackson. *The Thick of It* lies at the junction where the television mockumentary intersects with a much longer history of British political satire. We can think about its satirical treatment of Tony Blair and New Labour as being a relatively recent point on a timeline that stretches back through *Spitting Image*'s (1984–1996) caricatures of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, *Yes Minister*'s (1980–1984) comic exposé of the civil service's Machiavellian manoeuvring, Mike Yarwood's impressions of James Callaghan and Harold Wilson, and *Beyond the Fringe*'s lampooning of Harold Macmillan. It also taps into a longer history of political literature such as Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* ([1729] 2015), and satirical cartoons which include, but are by no means limited to: James Gillray's depictions of William Pitt the Younger and his adversary Charles Fox; Victor 'Vicky' Weisz's infamous 1958 depiction of Harold Macmillan as 'Supermac'; Gerald Scarfe's nightmarish representations of Thatcher as a pterodactyl; and Steve Bell's transformation of British Prime Minister David Cameron into a slippery prophylactic. Alison Jackson's work is another point on this satirical spectrum, which engages with the contemporary obsession with celebrity and explores the relationship between the public face of celebrity and the private world from which it is projected. In both sets of work there is a clear link between the public image of the politician and the machinations that go into constructing that image, and both act to undercut these processes of manipulation. This chapter explores these aspects as they pertain to the New Labour government.

The 2010 UK General Election and the Mockumentary

On Wednesday 28 April 2010, in the run-up to that year's UK General Election, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown was on the campaign trail, undertaking what should have been a straightforward visit to the northern town of Rochdale. Instead it turned into a self-proclaimed disaster. Just prior to departing, Brown staged a discussion with local pensioner Gillian Duffy, which was recorded by various news cameras. In a clearly agitated state, Duffy informed him that having voted Labour all her life, she now felt ashamed admitting to supporting the party. She then questioned the party's policies on crime, tax, benefits and immigration, which, due to the unanticipated tenor of the encounter, Brown struggled to defend.

Not realising that the lapel microphone provided by Sky News was still live, Brown removed himself from the situation to the (apparent) safety of his car, demonstrating his awareness of the potential negative impact of the event, by refuting his aide's claim that the press might not go with the story. 'They'll go with it', he can be heard to say, before unwittingly ensuring that fact with the following exchange:

Brown: That was a disaster. Should never have put me with that woman. Whose idea was that?
Aide: I don't know, I didn't see […] What did she say?
Brown: Everything. She's just this sort of bigoted woman that said she used to be Labour, I mean, it's just ridiculous.

The press latched onto the story instantly, and it was cruelly unfortunate that the PM's next port of call was for a radio interview with Jeremy Vine, who played him a recording of the gaffe. For the second time that day, the prime minister fell foul of the broadcast media when a video recording of the interview was released showing the startling image of the prime minister holding his head in his hands, listening to himself calling one of his supporters a bigot.

The occasions where MPs are asked to interact with ordinary members of the public have long been a potential political banana-skin. Perhaps most memorable in this regard is Margaret Thatcher's encounter with Bristol resident Diana Gould during a live television discussion on a 1982 edition of *Nationwide* (1969–1983) at the height of the Falklands conflict. It gained notoriety when Gould forcefully questioned the uncharacteristically flustered prime minister about the controversial decision to sink the Argentinian battleship *General Belgrano*. Such events remain a key concern for the media team of any politician.

What was particularly pertinent about the Brown–Duffy encounter—subsequently christened 'Bigotgate'—was the way in which the press responded to it. Many commentators perceived a similarity with a number of scenarios enacted within the political television mockumentary sitcom *The Thick of It*—which charts the back-room machinations of the fictional Department of Social Affairs and Citizenship (DoSAC)—and its spin-off film *In the Loop* (2009). *The Guardian*'s Kathy Sweeney, in a blog article entitled 'Bigotgate: The day the PM joined *The Thick of It*', described the event, as 'like viewing a live-action episode of *The Thick of It*' (2010); Hadley Freeman, also for *The Guardian*, described Brown's election

campaign as evolving 'ever more swiftly into a new series of *The Thick of It*' (2010); and Jamie Millar, writing for *GQ* magazine's website, made reference to *The Thick of It*'s creator by suggesting that it was a scene 'that could have been scripted by Armando Iannucci' (2010).

In fact, 'Bigotgate' did indeed bear a striking resemblance to a scenario featured in an October 2005 episode of *The Thick of It* in which MP Hugh Abbot (Chris Langham) is heckled by a disgruntled worker during a visit to a factory, resulting in the minister taking refuge on the factory roof whilst the woman is verbally abused by one of his aides. Having seen Abbot's disastrous visit to the factory, it is virtually impossible not to equate Duffy with the disgruntled worker, filtering the awkwardness and ridiculousness of the real event through its fictional precursor.

Brown's encounter with Duffy became a perfect platform to demonstrate the porosity between reality and fiction that characterised some aspects of the 2010 general election. The press seemed to rely on using *The Thick of It* as a way of making sense of Brown's blunder, as if these fictional narratives were perceived by the media to be able to provide us with a useful insight into real political events. As Armando Iannucci himself noted in an article for *The Independent* on 4 May, decrying the media coverage of 'Bigotgate',

> As someone who, in *The Thick of It*, has contrived several silly political moments like these, I appeared to be on a few insiders' contact lists, but there was something rather childish about the mobful of exultant voicemail messages left by hyper-ventilating journalists […] [asking] me to 'do' a quick response to these events. (Iannucci 2010)

The implication here is that the writer of a fictional television show was seen to be better placed to comment on real politics than either genuine politicians or political journalists.

This inability to separate the satire from that which it was satirising was further complicated by the extra-diegetic existence of Malcolm Tucker (Peter Capaldi), *The Thick of It*'s foul-mouthed director of communications, who was able to comment on these real-world events through a range of media channels. He could be found penning the regular 'Malcolm Tucker's Election Briefing' newspaper column for *The Guardian* (the real author was Jesse Armstrong, co-writer of *The Thick of It* and *In the Loop*) which declared the Duffy situation to be 'definitely as bad as it first seemed',

and 'unspinnable' (Tucker 2010a). In the same way that Tucker has much to say in relation to Hugh Abbot's situation in the fiction, he naturally had some words of advice for Brown:

> So, Bigotgate. I've been round and round this, and the only thing I can see that could pull it back for us is if we can manufacture belief in the potential existence of grainy footage of fatfaced Cameron hunched over a TV monitor violently masturbating while watching your Vine show appearance on a loop. We need to be flying this as a comical notion for the cynical that is also actually true for the credulous. (Tucker 2010a)[1]

The blurring of fact and fiction as suggested by the proposal of grainy footage of David Cameron (then Leader of the Opposition) neatly highlights the separation between the real world of Gordon Brown and the fake world of Malcolm Tucker. However, it also emphasises the porosity between the two that allows the fake to comment on the real, by suggesting that even the crassest of hybrid media images are received in a nuanced way. The suggestion that documentary footage can be tactically faked in order to lessen the impact of the Rochdale footage by exploiting those who cannot tell the difference sits alongside the notion that many *would* understand its status as a fiction, but that this can also be embraced. It is not, in fact, dissimilar to the multiplicity of ways in which the mockumentary itself can be received.

Tucker also took up residence on the social networking website Twitter, under the name @MtuckerNo10, and as the events in Rochdale unfolded, his tweets included,

> Jesus Christ. This is like watching Bambi get fucked by a giant bastard moose. FUCK #ge10 (Tucker 2010b)

In a further bit of extra-diegetic activity, one website allowed browsers to 'Tuckerise' existing Conservative Party campaign posters, replacing David Cameron's supposedly comforting expression and generic campaign slogans such as, 'We can't go on like this. I'll cut the deficit, not the NHS', with Tucker's manic stare and explicit quotes from *The Thick of It*, such as the much more satisfying, and perhaps more truthful, 'This coalface bullshit is gonna make us look like a bunch of gurning wankers' (Barefoot 2010).

The coverage of the 2010 general election demonstrated beyond any doubt that mockumentary satire had permeated the national culture to such a degree that, as with *This is Spinal Tap*'s (1984) impact on the rock documentary (see Chap. 3), it is now almost impossible to interpret real political images without simultaneously bringing the fake version to mind. 'Bigotgate' was seemingly impossible to talk about without mentioning *The Thick of It*, and as James Walters has noted, the programme has come 'to approach near-metonymic status as a phrase deployed in political commentary' (Walters 2016: 1). That the mockumentary had gained a significant cachet amongst television viewers and critics was most clearly communicated in a Party Political Broadcast (PPB) run by the Conservative Party during the 2010 campaign, which masqueraded as being on behalf of the 'Hung Parliament Party'. In it, viewers who wanted 'an end to transparency […] indecision and weak government […] a paralysed economy […] another election within a calendar year' were urged to vote 'Hung Parliament'. It concluded by suggesting that a vote for anybody other than the Conservative Party would do the trick. The film was broadcast the evening *before* 'Bigotgate'.

Over the last two decades, the mockumentary has played a significant role in emphasising the performative aspect of contemporary politics. 'Bigotgate' highlighted the porosity of audiences' engagement with media forms, and that in our experiences with the world around us, we do not compartmentalise the real, the performed, the fake and the fictional, even though we are aware of such distinctions. Our experiences of real events are composites of all of these modes of address, and the encounter with the text, such as watching news coverage of Brown's visit to Rochdale, is a site on which the collision of all of these forms takes place, resulting in the osmosis of fictional characters into real political commentary and vice versa. Hence the idea that Gordon Brown can look like Hugh Abbot, and the fictional characters Malcolm Tucker and Sir Humphrey Appleby—previously seen advising Prime Minister Jim Hacker (Paul Eddington) and played by Nigel Hawthorne in the BBC television sitcom *Yes, Prime Minister* (1986–1988)—could be removed from their fictional worlds to give humorous, but credible, commentary on genuine events during the 2010 election coverage, in the aforementioned newspaper column, and as a *Newsnight* (1980–) correspondent (this time played by Henry Goodman) for the BBC, respectively.

James Walters has highlighted the way that the 'generality' (2016: 23) of *The Thick of It* is one of the aspects that allows it to stand as a significant work of art. He makes the case that although we can see Malcolm Tucker as a cipher for Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's Director of Communications,

this is not a direct relationship. Instead, Tucker operates at a general level, satirising the processes of spin and media manipulation through the evocation of the entire culture of spin doctors and communication directors in general. This includes Campbell, but could be stretched to Bernard Ingham, Charlie Whelan or Andy Coulson amongst others (Walters suggests Damian McBride as another touchstone [ibid.: 22]). This is a compelling argument, and like *Spinal Tap*'s generic approach to parody it opens up the potential for the audience to make their own connections, creating a rich text in which Tucker is allowed to stand alongside these figures rather than exist in place of them.

Walters's approach to *The Thick of It* is to remove it from its specific context, arguing that the programme 'encapsulated a series of behaviours and attitudes found across decades, perhaps even centuries, of political communication, and we might view this as part of its wider resonance' (ibid.: 23). Although I am sympathetic to this approach, it is also the case that the programme *can* provide some key insights into the New Labour period of UK politics in particular. My intention here, then, is to acknowledge the wider connections with other eras of British politics whilst also to note (as I have done elsewhere in this book—see in particular Chap. 1) that there are resonances which stretch across a wide range of film and television texts (as well as political moments), and that this relationship with its specific audiovisual and historical context means that examining the programme's treatment of New Labour is instructive. In particular, *The Thick of It* acts as an interrogation of New Labour's propensity for spin and, significantly, spin's place within a developing media context characterised by 24-hour rolling news and the rise of celebrity culture. New Labour, *The Thick of It* and Alison Jackson's work all engage with this changing media landscape and the analysis here begins to demonstrate the ways in which the viewer's access to, understanding of, and attitudes towards the world of politics have been shaped by a media context characterised by rapid technological transformations. Both *The Thick of It* and Alison Jackson make it their project to interrogate, question and deconstruct this relationship using humour as a tool.

Walters suggests that a central strategy of *The Thick of It* is 'to strip away the veneer of political figures' stage management and concentrate entirely upon their unplanned, unmanaged selves' (ibid.: 26). Although I agree with the first part of this statement, I think the concerns of the show stretch beyond simply offering a view of the unguarded politician. Instead, I view *The Thick of It* as more concerned with examining how the private, backstage spaces are used to control their public image. In *The Thick of It*, the politician is not only 'off', they frequently move between being 'off' and being 'on', and it is this that I wish to examine here.

The Thick of It and the New Labour Government

New Labour came to power in May 1997 following a landslide election victory, which was the logical conclusion to a successful media campaign. At the heart of Tony Blair's initial impact was a crucial paradox: at a time in which the country wanted an end to cynicism, the most stage-managed and media-conscious government yet was voted into power. The level of construction was clearly apparent, suggesting that the dynamism and transparency longed for by the British population was to be found in a rebranded party with a young leader who was so clearly in touch with the mechanics of the media that the visibility of the image manipulation was itself a kind of transparency. In the television documentary *Blair: The Inside Story* (2007) satirist Rory Bremner suggests that one of the most compelling aspects of the Labour Party's image in 1997 was that 'you knew it was an act […] but you actually wanted to believe in it'. The opening days of Blair's premiership contained a number of examples where this fixation on the tension between the image and the reality came into focus; one a heavily stage-managed event, the other a slip-up captured by the media.

On the day after the election, Tony and Cherie Blair's triumphant arrival in Downing Street was precisely stage-managed; the cheering crowd composed entirely of party workers from Millbank and their families, waving Union Jacks and pre-prepared slogan-covered T-shirts. As Andrew Rawnsley suggests, '[t]he superficiality of this contrived spontaneity was instantly obvious' (2001: 15), but it was precisely this staginess and slickness that made it effective. By contrast, earlier that morning a delivery man had arrived at the Blairs' Islington home with a congratulatory bouquet of flowers. The door was answered by a dishevelled and clearly exhausted Cherie, who seemed to momentarily forget her presence at the heart of a media sensation. Noticing the team of press photographers situated across the road, Cherie's guard was raised and the door closed immediately, but the photos had been taken. In the '1997: Pop and Politics' episode of the documentary series *The Summer of…* (2006) Ian Hislop suggests that with this image of Cherie opening the door in a nightdress 'you suddenly have a picture of a real person' and that 'that was all part of it'.

These two moments from 2 May 1997 encapsulated the ethos surrounding Blair's election victory. Cherie answering the door appeared to demonstrate that the new prime minister and his family were real people who needed sleep after a late night and who were not trained to appear

pristine and spotless at all times in front of the media cameras. This informality was an image that had been played on throughout the election campaign, most notably in the 1997 party political broadcast directed by observational documentary filmmaker Molly Dineen in which Blair is seen in his Sedgefield home making a cup of tea (badly), and eating breakfast with his family.[2] On the other hand, the slickness of the Blairs' arrival in Downing Street suggested exactly the opposite. As Simon Sebag Montefiore notes in *The Summer Of…*, 'behind his studded informality was this iron projection of an image'.

One of the main targets of *The Thick of It*'s satire is the culture of spin which enveloped the New Labour government, and which was particularly associated with the figures of Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson. Whilst the creation of a successful media image was vital to the longevity of the 1979–1997 Conservative governments under Margaret Thatcher and, to a lesser extent, John Major, New Labour exacerbated this aspect, reimagining and rebranding the party as a whole, and manufacturing a media image in a way unfathomable during earlier political periods. Spin-doctoring had existed prior to this point, a fact comprehensively addressed by Nicholas Jones's work (1996, 1999, 2002). However, as Walters has noted, it 'was seen to intensify under […] New Labour's rise to power as the role of press and communications became ever more crucial in an era when rolling 24-hour news superseded the daily cycle of print media' (2016: 16).

Peter Mandelson has suggested that part of the role of spin-doctoring is 'to create the truth' (Viner 1997), a definition that to some extent mirrors the role of the mockumentary itself, which creates fictional texts which look on the surface as if they are factual. For New Labour, spin seemed to be born out of an acute paranoia that any negative press coverage would spell disaster for the government. In the age of 24-hour news, minor stories have more value, but are often sensationalised by the media. Blair criticised this practice stating that, 'It's a triumph or a disaster. A problem is "a crisis". A setback is a policy "in tatters". A criticism, "a savage attack"' (Price 2010: 389). Spin, and the frantic nature in which it was concocted, was seen as a way of preventing a minor issue escalating into a significant news story. Inevitably the spin machine often floundered and ran out of control, and as Peter Mandelson recalls, '[t]here was great emphasis on managing the media at the expense of managing policy. There was a sense that if you'd got the story right, you'd achieved something' (Rawnsley 2010: 9). The paranoia of ensuring that all negative news be

dealt with also meant that, as Press Secretary, Campbell was engaged in a 'daily firefight with the media' (ibid.), extinguishing stories or creating short-term and often untenable good news in order to put a positive spin on events. It is this 'firefight', along with the paranoia driving it, and the frantic leapfrogging from one bad story to the next, that is caricatured in *The Thick of It*.

Rawnsley has noted that the overt construction of image that was seen as a positive aspect of Blair's first term as prime minister would ultimately cease to be a virtue, and '[s]lickness of stage management would in time rebound against the government as it bred the suspicion that nothing done in its name could ever be taken at face value' (2001: 15). Just as it is difficult to view politics in quite the same way having seen *The Thick of It*, the positive mood of Blair's early years in government have been retrospectively tarnished by their association with the disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq, where spin was increasingly seen to have been used as a tool to justify an illegal war.

The Thick of It is firmly rooted in this era of pessimism, tying its satire, its tone and its narratives to the social and political period, much as *Yes Minister* and *Spitting Image* had throughout the 1980s. The programme reflects many genuine events that occurred during earlier years of the New Labour government. However, it was also so closely integrated with the contemporary political climate that it 'began to second-guess with uncanny accuracy the world of politics, leading to certain instances of life imitating art' (Walters 2016: 9).

The Thick of It's mockumentary style is a key component of its satirical effect. Like many recent mockumentary television programmes there is no sustained and explicit suggestion that there is a documentary crew present. As with the discussion of *Modern Family* in Chap. 4, the supposed contextual conditions of the filming have been dispensed with, but the image that is produced has a clear link to documentary style and method as it is hand-held, unrehearsed and responsive to the improvised performances. Despite this, *The Thick of It* has rarely been discussed in scholarship as a mockumentary, though Anette Pankratz does recognise that '[t]he series purports to be a fly-on-the-wall documentary' (2016: 281) and situates it within the wider landscape of mockumentary on the BBC, mentioning *People Like Us* (1999–2001), *The Office* (2001–2003), *Gary: Tank Commander* (2009–2012) and *Twenty Twelve* (2011–2012) in particular (ibid.: 291).

James Walters spends significant time discussing the style of the programme, describing it as offering 'an interrogative lens' which

> becomes a key component within the programme's distinctive breathless intensity, combining with the often frantic tempo of the editing to create an unyielding rhythm that complements the actions of some characters and consumes the actions of others. (2016: 37–38)

It can be argued that from start to finish *The Thick of It* forms a direct association with—and frequently replicates—the urgent 'liveness' of 24-hour rolling news coverage. This has an impact on the way we are to understand the programme, as I will describe in more detail shortly.

This aesthetic alignment with live television news coverage also brings us into the world of the celebrity through the 24-hour news cycle's convergence with aspects of tabloid news reportage, and particularly the paparazzi photographer. The result is that the politician is cast as a celebrity, a performer and, perhaps, even as a star. Discussing what he terms 'a dramatised society', Raymond Williams notes that, unlike an actor who can move from part to part without causing difficulties for an audience, the performances enacted by real public figures are problematic as 'the breaks [between the roles] are much harder to discern' (1989: 8). Williams points in particular to the politician as a site of varying modes of performance, making an explicit parallel between a general election and a theatrical audition:

> "I speak for Britain" runs the written line of that miming public figure, though since we were let in on the auditions, and saw other actors trying for the part, we may have our reservations. (1989: 9)

There is a suggestion that, as with dramatic actors, politicians in the public eye are almost always performing a role, auditioning for it, or preparing for the part. The refining of Margaret Thatcher's image between 1975 and the Conservative election victory in 1979 was akin to an actor preparing for a part. As Thatcher herself claimed in 1981, '[y]ou have to think for the first time in your life not only about the impression that you make in the flesh but what is it going to look like on the news on television' (Cockerell 1988: 263). That Thatcher regularly employed dramatists (including Ronald Miller and *Yes Minister* co-creator Antony Jay) to write her speeches, undertook a prolonged programme of voice coaching, and carefully curated her wardrobe to compliment the environments in which she would be filmed (Cockerell 1988: 215–220, 234–235, 253), completed the dramatisation process.

Blair's manipulation of image is similar and it is not too much of a stretch for us to think about both Thatcher and Blair in the same critical terms as film stars. Richard Dyer has argued that

> The star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars. A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and 'private' life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech. (1986: 2–3)

All of these aspects have their analogue within the political image machine and are designed to position the political candidate as a slick, charismatic entity. The intrusive cameras of the interested television news channels function as an element of the politician's media (or star) persona. This notion of the politician as a celebrity will be returned to in the discussion of Alison Jackson's work in the second half of the chapter, but for the moment it is important to view *The Thick of It* as embodying a visual style that replicates 24-hour rolling news's attempts to capture the celebrity off-guard.

Satirising Spin

This discussion focuses on one specific episode of *The Thick of It*, the first of the second series. Two narrative problems are posed for Tucker to solve in the episode. First, Hugh Abbot becomes embroiled in a public relations disaster during a visit to a factory, when he is accosted by a worker (Di Botcher) who complains about the unsanitary hospital conditions in which her ill mother is being kept. This encounter ends with Abbot's advisor Glenn Cullen (James Smith) verbally abusing the woman in front of an ITN camera crew. Meanwhile, news of a government overspend is leaked to the press. Both situations have the potential to significantly undermine the government's image once reconfigured as news stories. The narrative therefore centres on Tucker's attempts to manage these two crises, downplaying the significance of both through spin.

Abbot's factory visit is the overarching narrative event of the episode and as with many genuine political photo-opportunities it combines the staged with the spontaneous. It is specifically designed to last barely longer than its coverage on the news, and Abbot arranges for Robyn Murdoch (Polly Kemp)—a significant name for a Senior Press Officer—to pretend that something demands his attention back in Westminster once they have been at the factory for twenty minutes. Abbot is also displeased that there will only be a regional press team covering the event, though in the end it *does* gain national coverage for all the wrong reasons.

After leaving his car, Abbot talks to the factory employees, and with well-feigned delight says, 'Hello, good to meet you', to each of them in turn, the various cameras capturing the moment. The visual style of the sequence is broadly in keeping with live news coverage. Several cameras are present, including the aforementioned regional news team and a number of photographers. But so too are the documentary/sitcom cameras, which are as much a part of the diegesis as the others (Fig. 5.1). Indeed, the cameras that are visible in shot are actually recording the images that we are watching now (Fig. 5.2) *and* will see later as part of the television news coverage (Fig. 5.3), collapsing the diegetic documentary crew, the regional news team and the production team of *The Thick of It* into one entity.

Fig. 5.1 The camera crew (right) as part of *The Thick of It*'s diegesis

Fig. 5.2 Shots from this camera form part of the mockumentary image…

Fig. 5.3 …and also capture the footage seen in the ITN editing suite

The Thick of It's replication of an urgent aesthetic of television news reportage instils the mockumentary sitcom image with a similar urgency. It also draws on the increasingly improvised style of news-gathering required to fill the 24-hour news schedules, which prioritises interesting footage over stylistic precision. Portable and quick to set up outside broadcast cameras have become the norm, as has the use of user-generated content sent in by viewers from mobile phones (Harrison 2010; Wardle and Williams 2010)

where the roughness of the footage adds a desirable element of immediacy and drama to the news coverage. This documentary-style image adds a sense of immediacy, spontaneity and urgency to events that is characteristic of the kind of news event Abbot is attempting to manufacture, just without the noteworthy content. This is heightened by the unexpected interruption of the disgruntled factory worker.

As the minister comes towards the end of the group, an off-screen female voice can be heard to ask, 'Do you know what it's like to clean up your own mother's piss?' At first it appears as if Abbot has not heard the comment; he looks to be about to continue his greetings, and in doing so reveal that he is simply going through the motions for the cameras. Finally sensing that something is amiss, Abbot does a double take. 'I'm sorry?' he asks, seeking clarification of the remark. The camera loses interest in the minister's grinning face and seeks out the owner of the voice: a middle-aged Welsh woman in a blue tabard. In an instant, Abbot loses control of both the situation and the attention of the cameras, and the event transitions from a low-key publicity drive to a news story with much greater reach. The combination of the spontaneity of the performances and the shifting control that is exhibited by the urgent, on-the-fly camera work enhances the comedy. Abbot has the national coverage that he was after.

The proximity of the reframed camera captures the woman's reply in great detail, 'Do you? I mean she was in that home for sixteen weeks. Do you know what it's like to clean up your own mother's piss?' The responsive camera continues to pan rapidly between the two parties, capturing their various responses. Abbot feigns sympathy, out of embarrassment rather than any genuine concern, and the situation seems to be under control when he tells her that 'our hearts, all our hearts, go out to you'. The camera's movements are calmed as it reframes to include both speakers in the same frame for the first time.

However, Abbot's attempts to placate the woman are not sufficient and she becomes increasingly agitated. His pool of deflection tactics clearly exhausted, he tries a different tack, suggesting that, 'I think that I'm probably not the right person to talk to about this', adding that 'urinary and affairs like that are probably more … more … more … Health'. It is a simple statement behind which lies a series of verbal and logical summersaults that do nothing but reflect the problem back at him. He is not technically wrong; the woman's specific issues are not his responsibility. However, the complaint comes from a place where the avenues of health-care provision have

already been explored. Thus, the statement becomes an amusing expression of Abbot's failure to understand the issue. The woman isn't asking for him to cure her mother, she's telling him that health-care policy in general is failing its patients. His response thus turns the issue back into one about government policy. Even if Abbot's argument holds firm—that this is an issue for the Department of Health—this is hardly going to placate a complainant who knows that she is unlikely to get another opportunity to express her concerns to a government minister, and whose diatribe is already in full flow.

Attempting to extricate himself from the situation he hurries away, desperately trying to find something to say to deflect attention away from the intrusion and he feigns interest in the 'fantastic landscaping' of the uninspiring stone, brick and steel buildings. Unable to shake off the concerned woman, even once inside the factory lobby, Abbot is left in a painful spatial and temporal limbo as he waits for an elevator to arrive, grinning inanely, presumably in the hope that if at least one of them is smiling the recorded images won't look too damning. This is another fatal misjudgement, and he now appears to be grinning at the woman's plight. 'What are you grinning at?' she yells, now furious. 'Do you think it's funny? Do you think I'm funny? Do you think my mother's piss is funny? Well it's not funny. She's not laughing. She's pissing herself! I'm not laughing, I'm crying!'

Like Spinal Tap's Nigel Tufnel titling his song 'Lick My Love Pump', the description of the woman's mother 'not laughing' but 'pissing herself' is loaded with comic potential, given the phrase's double-meaning as both a literal symptom of old age/illness and as a colloquialism for hysterical laughter, and this punchline forms the pinnacle of the sequence's comic impetus. Seconds later the image cuts to Abbot taking shelter on the factory roof, whilst Cullen deals with the worker in a field below.

The aesthetic urgency that characterises the sequence is a product of *The Thick of It*'s mode of production. As with *This is Spinal Tap* and Christopher Guest's other work, the action is improvised around a loose script, with performers responding to the unanticipated actions and dialogue delivered by their co-stars. This is filmed by an equally responsive and spontaneous camera crew, creating a visual style which, as well as being characterised by unsteady camera movement, replicates, to a point, the unplanned actions and aesthetic look of spontaneous live news. The performance and aesthetic styles are therefore reciprocal: structuring *The Thick of It* as a mockumentary allows for a certain style of performance, yet

it is precisely the spontaneity of the performances that give the show its improvised look, necessitating the unsteady camera work which responds to the unplanned performances and the characteristically rough editing patterns through which the funniest takes are compiled.

As a result, the coverage of Abbot's factory visit looks virtually identical to the news coverage of similar real-life situations. That it anticipates with remarkable prescience Gordon Brown's conversation with Gillian Duffy has already been mentioned. However, it also reworks Tony Blair's encounter with Sharron Storer, who ambushed Blair during a visit to Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth hospital during the 2001 election campaign and whose unanticipated interjection punctured 'the artifice of controlled campaigning' (Rawnsley 2001: 489). This reflects the programme's ethos at a wider level, that whilst lots of the events that occur might appear to be extreme, they are not beyond the realms of possibility given the circumstances of government and its relationship with live television news.

Each of the scenarios speaks towards a confluence of political performativity, an accelerated media landscape, and the public's knowledge of acceptable media roles. The performance of self in a media-saturated society is not restricted to those who are in the public eye; the citizen too is aware that there are a range of roles available for them to perform, or indeed from which they can choose to deviate. Each of these interjectors are middle-aged working-class women (a group who, via the intersection of these categories, have been historically absent from public debate), presumably selected to form part of the stage-managed crowd because they are deemed likely to be compliant, and unlikely to realise the potentially subversive power that they have in the situation. Except that in each of these scenarios the women *did* know and utilised their platforms effectively. Rather than 'life imitating art', then, Gillian Duffy could instead be seen to be subliminally imitating Sharon Storer, Diana Gould or any number of other working-class women who have gone 'off script'. On the other hand, by taking their cues from past political realities, the creators of *The Thick of It* construct fact-based, but ludicrous-seeming storylines, that often seem preposterous until the events they project occur (again) for real. When this happens, the genuine politicians come to look caricatured, appearing to embody the behaviour previously reserved for characters in a fictional television sitcom.

Another significant way in which the Abbot and Brown encounters are similar is that in both cases the initial concern is centred on an awareness that the laborious efforts of arranging a staged photo-opportunity have turned into significant negative publicity. Brown's assertion that the media

will 'go with it' in response to Duffy's questions makes this clear and Abbot is disappointed to hear from Cullen that the ITN news team 'reckon they've got some great shots' of the disagreement. However, in both cases these moments of self-reflection actually worsen the problem. Brown's day was made worse by his 'bigot' comment, and the 'piss woman's' interruptions become too much for Cullen, who tells her to 'please shut up for one fucking minute!' before realising that he is still being filmed, and rather ridiculously claiming that he's 'asking nicely'. Both incidents elevate their respective stories from mere embarrassments to important media events.

It is as a result of Abbot's encounter with the 'piss woman' at the factory that Malcolm Tucker's spin machine springs into action to limit the extent of the crisis. He invades the ITN editing suite to discuss the coverage with the producer, Mark Davies (Robert Portal). The discussion unfolds as a push-and-pull between the two factions, both of whom wish to manipulate the footage to different ends. Tucker queries the decision to use certain shots, and in a cynical and transparent attempt to kill the story, suggests that the tabloidisation of the story represents a 'dumbing down of the news agenda'. Davies suggests that he *is* going to run the story in a manner of his choosing, suggesting that 'this is a traditional, old-fashioned news story, called "Minister looks a tit"'. An increasingly agitated Tucker continues to question the editing decisions being made, arguing that 'there is a difference between allowing someone's natural tittishness to come through and just exploiting it through camera work'.

There is an additional irony to Tucker's complaints in that the exploitation of political 'tittishness' through editing and camerawork is an exact description of *The Thick of It*'s style. When Tucker complains that Davies is 'sticking one tit moment on top of another tit moment' and thereby creating a scenario 'that wouldn't happen in real life', he is also unwittingly examining the mechanics of mockumentary comedy, which performs a heightened version of documentary reality. Tucker's commentary on the media production process, then, reveals the manipulation that goes into the mediation of politics from all sides. The spin doctor wants the footage presented in a favourable way, the news editor does not. Both involve processes of manipulation and both represent an attempt to present as real something that 'wouldn't happen in real life'. The same is true of the mockumentary, until it *does* happen in real life. When this happens the real news footage looks remarkably like the mockumentary version, and so the suggestion that the news is as much a construction as the fiction carries across into our understanding of those depictions.

Walters has argued that *The Thick of It* organises its visual style around Tucker, that he is in command and control throughout and that as a result the camera is drawn to him. As he notes,

> the programme attaches us to Tucker […] The fusion between character and style creates a further bond between character and audience, tying us into his actions and reactions—often at the expense of those other individuals in scenes. (2016: 34)

His analysis of the opening sequence of the programme's first episode (ibid.: 25–38) is compelling in demonstrating how our view begins in alignment with the new Minister for Social Affairs (Timothy Bentinck), but is quickly drawn towards Tucker as he gains control of a situation which eventually leads to the Minister's resignation. Walters goes on to argue that 'Tucker remains at the epicentre of the programme's aesthetic approach and the bond between character and style endures' (ibid.: 38); and that at the centre of *The Thick of It*'s diegesis 'sits Tucker: the character most at ease within the programme's representational style, most in tune with its frenetic pace and rhythm' (ibid.: 40). The impression given is that Tucker is in complete control of the camera until the point of his downfall in the final episodes of the final series, where Walter's argues that '[g]iven that the programme's uncompromising style is so closely fused with Tucker's abrasive personality from the very beginning of episode one, the manner in which his eventual downfall is depicted becomes a matter of significance' (ibid.: 41). Notably, he loses the ability to control and dictate the style.

This is a convincing argument, but it suggests that Tucker is himself always in control of the situations he finds himself in. This is not the case; indeed, because of their investment in interrogating the mechanics of government spin, most episodes depend on control potentially slipping away from Tucker and his team at key moments. We can begin to develop Walter's overview of the programme's style by returning to the notion that I posited earlier in this chapter that *The Thick of It*'s mockumentary credentials lie in its pastiching of the conventions of live, 'on the scene' news reportage. In such scenarios, the cameraperson is drawn to the most significant and most interesting aspects of the events they are filming. If one is a canny media performer then the attention of the cameraperson can be commanded, and control can be sustained as long as you remain the most worthwhile person to point the camera at. This is what both Abbot and Brown are attempting in their respective constituency visits. However, the cameraperson is under no obligation to continue filming if

something more interesting arrives. In his work on music documentaries, Adrian Wootton argues that filmmakers should try and keep the audience out of concert films, 'unless the audience is doing something so extraordinary it has to be filmed' (1995: 95). This suggests a useful way of thinking about documentary practices, where control over what gets to be filmed always lies with the camera operator who will choose to capture what they deem to be the most interesting aspects of the scenario in front of them. Within this environment some control over the camera does lie with the subjects because they can choose to be more or less interesting. However, in the situations discussed in this chapter, the politicians lose their ability to command the attention of the cameraperson because the interjectors become a more interesting subject. As such, Duffy, the 'piss woman' and Davies all gain the attention of their respective camerapeople, and thus control of the situation, because they offer something novel.

Tucker usually commands the attention of the camera in the way Walters suggests because he is generally the most interesting and most 'in control' person in any scene in which he features. However, this is not always the case, and when this control slips—as it does in the ITN editing suite and in the subsequent sequence where he addresses the Ministry of Defence leak—so does the camera's position of subservience. Instead, the disruptive element becomes the focus. The 'piss woman' and the ITN editor draw the attention of the camera and the style tends to becomes even more frenetic, reflecting Tucker's own loss of control of the situation through his inability to automatically command the attention of the cameraperson in the manner he wishes. Having dealt with the Abbot story, Tucker is told that the overspend leak is imminent and he runs back to Westminster in a frantic state. Rather than directly controlling the camera, his panic becomes the story and the cameraperson gains the upper hand in the relationship, with the urgency reflected in the juddery camerawork. Tucker is still the subject of the image, but it is his loss of control that commands the attention, not his actions.

Aware that the story is significant, Tucker and his colleagues attempt to address the situation by obfuscating the leak by hiding the relevant figures within a much larger data dump. In a frantic state, Tucker orders his team to,

> Fuck up the numbers, right. Overcomplicate. Stats, percentages, international comparisons, information. E-mail them fucking wads of information and tell them they'd better get their heads around it before they put pen to paper or I'll be up their arses like a fucking Biafran ferret.

It is critical that Tucker's central concern is *not* with resolving the crisis, but rather with making sure that it has as little impact on the news as possible. As such it is reminiscent of Labour press officer Jo Moore's crass assertion in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks that it was a 'very good day to get out anything that we want to bury' (Rawnsley 2010: 130). Here, as with almost every other moment in the show, *The Thick of It* mirror's Mandelson's view of spin (New Labour or otherwise) by suggesting that it is about fabricating an alternative reality in order to hide problems from public view and sell a false image that those in charge are—to quote Theresa May's misguided 2017 General Election campaign slogan—'strong and stable' leaders. Policy and politics rarely come into the equation.

In another echo of Blairite spin, Tucker finds himself having to juggle two crises at the same time. As well as dealing with Blair's encounter with Sharon Storer, in the real world of 16 May 2001, Alastair Campbell also had to address the delicate matter of John Prescott, who had punched an egg-throwing member of the public. Ultimately, the Prescott story gained the most press attention, overshadowing the Storer encounter. Tucker's plan deliberately reworks this state of affairs, and having successfully argued to have the Abbot story dropped down the news's running order, he realises that its importance must be re-elevated to hide the more damaging overspend. The episode ends on an inevitably ironic note, with Tucker and his team cheering when Cullen's encounter with the 'piss woman'—which he had argued so vociferously to suppress—opens the news bulletin. Abbot is also happy, since the emphasis of the story has shifted away from him towards Cullen, due to Abbot's special advisor Ollie Reeder (Chris Addison) having supplied ITN with Cullen's photograph, the availability of visual material making this shift in target both possible and newsworthy. The episode therefore addresses the way in which the government spin machine can manipulate the news media into doing their bidding. This is a reflection of the series as a whole, and Tucker frequently forces journalists into following the government's line by suggesting that if they fail to comply, they will be cut out of the loop, clearly something that no political journalist could afford to happen.

I have already suggested that the boundaries between reality and fictional versions of that reality have become porous in the minds of programme makers, audiences and critics due to the fact that we are always using cognitive experience to inform our understanding of the world

around us. If a political event occurs which bears some similarity to a previously seen event, real or fictional, it is likely that we will mobilise this knowledge of the past to help us understand the present. This process becomes a particular novelty when we witness a situation in which the reality appears to be stranger—or at least as strange—as the fiction. It is, perhaps, for this reason that the press felt the need to use *The Thick of It* to underpin their comments about Brown's encounter with Duffy, or why Armando Iannucci was perceived to be a suitable person to provide political commentary. Comedy has always been used as a means to comment on the ridiculousness of reality: 'People think that "Yes Minister" was farfetched' (Hansard 1997)[3]; something was 'like a script for *The Thick Of It* but more preposterous' (Tweedie 2010); or an event 'was *even more* Spinal Tap' (italics as original) (Davis 2007: 20).

The mockumentary text, however, advances on earlier modes of political satire because it has the added benefit of also *looking like* the real. It isn't just the narrative similarity between Abbot's factory visit and 'Bigotgate' that makes it ironic, but the fact that the visual presentation of the two events is identical. If the driving force of satire is to reveal hidden truths, then the mockumentary is doubly effective for doing this in a way that suggests that we are seeing what this hypothetical 'truth' would look like were we accessing it in the same way as the 'spun' version.

At the same time, the mockumentary is used as a comic device, designed to create humour from the disjuncture between the sobering form and the ridiculous content. Often this is the result of unsuitable people being placed in the documentary-like form; we do not expect much from them and our expectations are met. This is the case with most of the 'ordinary people' observed in *People Like Us*, or *The Office*'s David Brent (Ricky Gervais), whose overt and incessant performance for the camera crew make him either a poor documentary subject, or an excellent find, depending on where you stand on the notion of the constructed documentary. Conversely, there is the subject whom we expect to be more intelligent than they really are, and the comedy here comes from the gap between our expectations and the reality. This is the case with most of the characters in *The Thick of It*, the comedy becoming satire when it has a distinct political implication and begins to inflect our understanding of the real world. Having watched *The Thick of It*, it is difficult to watch straight news coverage of an arranged political engagement without wondering what is occurring just off-camera, and what conversations might have gone into structuring any particular statement in any particular way. *The Thick of It*

takes the off-screen space of the news and puts it on screen. At its least specific, it makes us question the various agendas that might be in play when we watch television coverage of current affairs. At its most specific, it allows us to posit specific possibilities when situations in the fiction occur for real. The impact of this aesthetic in purely dramatic terms is to increase the sense of immediacy and urgency evident both within the visual image and the narrative. The drama is more exciting and the comedy funnier as a result of the dynamic camerawork, the unconventional editing patterns, the sense of spontaneity and improvisation, and, in the case of *The Thick of It*, the idea that all of this energy has some direct link to the reality inhabited by the viewing audience.

Alison Jackson

It has been suggested by scholars such as John Corner (2002), Helen Piper (2004), Stella Bruzzi (2006) and Annette Hill (2008) that the gap between factual and fictional broadcasting has begun to narrow. By adopting stylistic features and narrative patterns from fiction formats, factual entertainment now looks increasingly similar to those dramatic formats from which it has borrowed. The television mockumentary has had a similar impact on the relationship between reality and satire, often opening up a porous boundary between one and the other. Whilst you could not mistake *Spitting Image*'s Thatcher puppet, Peter Cook's Harold Macmillan or Mike Yarwood's James Callaghan for the real things, with the satirical mockumentary's aesthetic of immediacy and faux-realism, it is no longer so easy to discern the satire from the reality. The mockumentary format means that in its style and content, *The Thick of It* at times looks and behaves very similarly to news coverage of real political events. It is this proximity of form and content to the straight media images that makes mockumentary satire so effective, and why we can rarely view the real without thinking about the fiction. This is especially the case when the same events happen in both.

Nowhere is this collapsing of the real and the fake more visible than in the way that news footage of political figures has been manipulated or fabricated for satirical purposes. The comedic re-editing of news footage is not new—it was a regular feature of *Not the Nine O'clock News* (1979–1982) and Charles A. Ridley had remixed film of Nazi troops goose-stepping comically to 'The Lambeth Walk' for the Ministry of Information in 1942 (Carpenter 2000: 135; Pillai 2017: 137 n94). However, numerous televi-

sion programmes have brought the technique of image manipulation into the twenty-first century by working at the juncture of digital media, 24-hour news and society's fascination with celebrity culture.

Perhaps the mode of image manipulation that comes closest to a purely mockumentary aesthetic is the faking of footage to such a degree that it could appear genuine. The work of Alison Jackson is particularly interesting here. Jackson, a photographer and programme maker, photographs celebrity look-alikes in situations in which the public would be unlikely ever to see them.[4] In Jackson's work, the grainy and blurry photos, unstable newsreel and hidden camera footage mean that it is often difficult to distinguish the veracity of the image at first sight. It is here where the satire in Jackson's work lies. Her work is populated with caricatures of well-known personalities exhibiting extreme behaviour or carrying out mundane tasks: in one photograph "Mick Jagger" irons in his underpants (Jackson 2003) (Fig. 5.4); in another "Donald Trump" takes a selfie with a topless Miss Mexico in the Oval Office with a 'Make America Great Again' camera

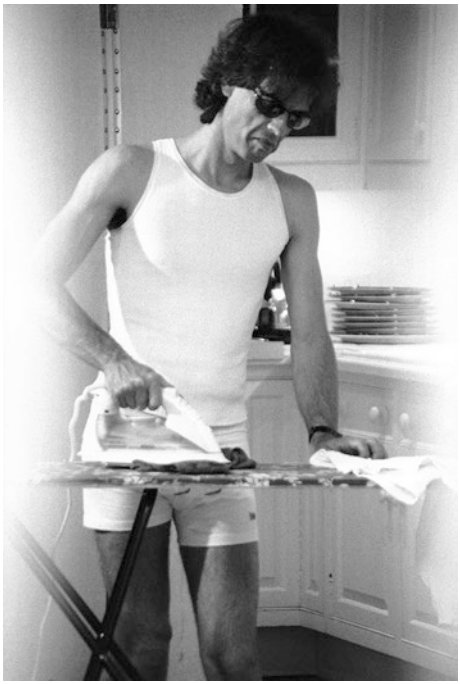

Fig. 5.4 Mick Jagger irons in his underpants. Image © and used with permission from Alison Jackson, Artist, London 2008

phone (Jackson 2016). The purpose of these images is to simultaneously demystify the notion of celebrity, whilst also revealing something about the personality that is known to the public, but usually kept out of sight. Images of Jagger doing the ironing and the Queen washing up or on the toilet are amusing because it normalises them.

Jackson strips the celebrities of their audience, placing them within private—often domestic—spaces. Her work is bound up with the British public's fixation with celebrity culture. Magazines such as *Heat* are filled with paparazzi shots of off-guard celebrities, and the incessant attention paid by such publications to the distinctions between the celebrity being 'on' or 'off' is seemingly at the centre of this fascination. Jackson takes this a step further, as while the images in *Heat* and its peers frequently catch celebrities in moments of transition from 'on' to 'off' (or vice-versa) in the street, getting in or out of cars, or going in and out of doorways, Jackson's photographs take us into the private spaces that are otherwise off-limits to the paparazzi.

It is possible to see similarities with the early observational documentary makers, who turned their cameras on well-known public figures in the hope of gaining some insight into what they were like when out of the public eye. Jackson's work fits into this long-standing infatuation with the lives of celebrities behind closed doors. However, instead of photographing the real people, she imagines possible scenarios and then stages them for the camera. This is a common satirical strategy, but Jackson's use of the mockumentary format gives her work a directness, and side-steps the problems observational documentary filmmakers had of being unable to actually get behind the mask because the subjects were always performing a version of themselves for the camera. When Jackson's work is printed in newspapers it frequently causes controversy because of the belief that they might be mistaken as genuine (see for example England 2016; Garrett et al. 2016), demonstrating how perceptive her insights are and how they ring true with her audience.

Jackson's body of work comprises a series of apparently extreme images, which are thrown into relief when we learn that the reality might be equally ridiculous. The television programme *Blaired Vision* (2007) is a semi-fictionalised documentary broadcast on Channel 4 on the eve of Tony Blair's departure from government, which charts his time as prime minister. It is semi-fictional because although it is ostensibly a factual overview of Blair's time in office and adheres to a broadly factual narrative, Jackson adds many imagined embellishments which may or may not be fictional, but which *are* staged for her camera and performed by impersonators. Jackson is, of

course, keen to highlight the fakery of her work, and like all of the texts discussed in this book, its effect depends on the ultimate recognition that it is contrived. This leads to some ironically tongue-in-cheek moments of signposting and the most intertextual example of this in *Blaired Vision* occurs during the section addressing supposed government corruption. 'Covert' footage shows Blair and a number of others meeting discreetly on a tennis court, accompanied by the Spinal Tap song 'Gimme Some Money', an amusing nod to the complex web of connections which link Blair and Jackson to *This is Spinal Tap* and the mockumentary form more generally.

Blaired Vision takes existing news footage and manipulates it by combining it with newly created fake footage in order to make viewers re-examine and reinterpret the original images. There are clear links to *Not the Nine O'clock News* here, which frequently edited separate news items together to form humorous scenarios: a clip of Prince Charles firing a bow and arrow cuts to the image of a runner falling over, making it look like the former has attacked the latter; a news clip of Princess Anne in the back of a limousine cuts to footage of a similar-looking car being driven off the back of a ferry and into the sea. However, unlike these earlier examples, Jackson's montages are entirely believable, often mundane, scenarios which we could imagine actually happening.

Blaired Vision opens with distorted and interlaced (genuine) news footage of Tony and Cherie Blair's arrival in Downing Street, accompanied by D:Ream's anthemic song 'Things Can Only Get Better', the soundtrack to Labour's 1997 election victory. More images from Downing Street are intercut with footage of the celebrating shadow cabinet from the previous evening's victory party, as a voice-over states, 'May 1997. Tony Blair swept into Downing Street; a landslide victory for New Labour'. The couple enter the building and close the door behind them, shutting the media out. However, Jackson's camera seems to have somehow managed to gain entry, and the genuine news footage is replaced by a shaky, grainy and silent image of (the) Tony (John Brolly) and Cherie (Margaret Fowler) (impersonators) in bed, apparently filmed through the keyhole. 'Things Can Only Get Better' is replaced on the soundtrack by Queen's 'We Are the Champions' as we watch a naked prime minister and his wife cheering on their victory whilst having sex. After a few seconds, fake-Cherie turns and quickly pulls on a nightgown before standing up and heading towards the door (and the camera). The image then cuts to another piece of genuine news footage: the real Cherie opening the door, dishevelled and in her nightdress to receive flowers from a delivery man, an incident already discussed at the start of this chapter.

This sequence is typical of Jackson's manipulation of news footage. The editing together of images of the victorious couple engaged in celebratory sex and of Cherie answering the door asks for the two moments to be read as continuous, recontextualising the genuine news footage and changing the meaning we instil on it. Cherie Blair's dishevelment no longer looks like the result of an exhausted person woken early after a busy night, but someone who answers the door in an unthinking hurry in order to resume coitus. The irony is that Jackson's imaginary and voyeuristic take on what was actually occurring off-screen just before Cherie opened the door is entirely believable and may not be far from the truth, particularly given Blair's reference to similar events in his autobiography (I am somewhat loath to expose readers to these passages, one of which was nominated for *Literary Review*'s 'Bad Sex in Fiction Award' award, but the bounds of academic rigour require that I point you in the direction of: Blair 2010: 21–22, 65, 67–68).

The next image we see, after a short (real) interview with former director general of the BBC Greg Dyke, is more faked footage, this time of Blair standing on a bed, playing a red telecaster guitar in his shirt, Labour-red tie, underpants and gartered socks, and miming along to the Queen song which is still playing on the soundtrack. Chiming with the image of Blair as wannabe-college rock star and his schmoozing with key Britpop figures such as Noel Gallagher and Creation Records boss Alan McGee, and extrapolating a related piece of news footage in which Blair can be seen strolling along Downing Street with a guitar case in his hand, this image is funny because it is entirely plausible; like *Spinal Tap* it goes 'one louder', but in this case it doesn't overstep the bounds of believability.[5] The sense of adolescent excitement found in the footage of Blair victoriously playing his guitar in his underwear is not a million miles away from Andrew Rawnsley's revealing account that shortly after he became prime minister, Blair could be found jumping up and down on the tennis court of a friend's north London mansion yelling 'I'm the Prime Minister! I'm the Prime Minister' (2010: 8).

Jackson's work is frequently about deconstructing some of the most familiar and taken-for-granted aspects of the New Labour government and about Tony Blair in particular, by asking the audience to re-examine familiar, factual images in order to suggest that everything may not be as it appears, or, conversely, that our suspicions of staged media manipulation are on the money. Perhaps the most bitingly satirical moment in *Blaired Vision* is the suggestion that Blair's address to the television cam-

eras the morning after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, was a cynically constructed media event in which every single detail and gesture had been pre-rehearsed to enhance Blair's popularity. Whilst we might think that the real version of this event was created for the media and demonstrated a significant level of media skill, Tony Blair's emotion does seem sincere. However, Jackson asks us to question whether anything done in the name of New Labour can be taken at face value.

A hidden camera catches fake-Alastair Campbell and fake-Blair in a room, supposedly in the early hours following Princess Diana's death, watching images of the princess and brainstorming their response; 'What a story!' Campbell enthuses. Blair's famous description of Diana as 'the people's princess' becomes the central focus. Fake-Blair suggests 'the paparazzi princess', which fake-Campbell describes as 'shit', the abrasiveness responding to the popular image of Campbell as being a hostile and vindictive person. Then, mocking the rebranding of the Labour Party as New Labour, the pair riff on the idea of the 'new' prefix as somehow suggesting dynamism, coming up with 'the new people's princess of new Britain'. They eventually settle on 'the people's princess', with both fake-Blair and fake-Campbell becoming excited, having a celebratory drink and high-fiving, an image totally at odds with the event they are discussing and implying that the real Tony Blair's apparently genuine sadness was actually a very skilful acting job.

The sequence continues as Blair and Campbell rehearse the speech on-camera, with Campbell examining how Blair comes across on a nearby television monitor, the camera seemingly operated by the silent figure of Peter Mandelson. Again, the shaky, grainy and unfocused footage we are seeing implies a voyeuristic paparazzi camera peering through a crack in the door. The familiarity of Blair's mannerisms is addressed when fake-Blair stops mid-speech and utters in exasperation, 'What am I gonna do with my hands?' Referencing Blair's familiar jerky hand movements, fake-Campbell offers a solution: 'Just remember Tony: puppet hands', before mimicking Blair's up-and-down hand gestures. Finally, the pair practice the precise manner in which the statement will end, with fake-Campbell directing, 'Good. You hold the emotion, turn … go out to the church.' Still watching fake-Blair's performance via the monitor, Campbell once again starts to get excited, 'Yes!' he says, as Jackson cuts to the real news footage of Blair pausing with a sombre face, turning in the exact manner described by fake-Campbell, and heading into his local church. Fake-Campbell's words continue to sound over the real images, as if he is

somehow directing the real Blair and stage-managing the real event (which of course, the real Campbell would have been): 'Yes! Brilliant! We've got it!'

The irreverent, iconoclastic tone of the sequence is particularly significant. The real speech is generally regarded as a key example of Blair demonstrating how in-tune he was with the country during the early years of the New Labour government. In contrast to the royal family's silence, his swift and emotional response to Princess Diana's death suggested that he very keenly sensed the country's mood. However, in *Blaired Vision* we don't get to hear the familiar speech from Blair himself, summoned from the archive, as we might expect of a retrospective documentary. Instead the words are spoken (and transformed) by his mockumentary doppelganger, the fake taking the place of the real as part of the 'documentary' narrative. Presenting Blair's speech as a cynical public relations stunt designed—at an early point in is premiership—to heighten his popularity with the British people, as *Blaired Vision* does, strips away this central element of compassion and empathy and it almost feels as if it is the princess herself who is the target.

Blaired Vision—the title itself seemingly testifying to the porous boundary between the real and the fake—is therefore a mockumentary commentary on the Blair era, with the manipulated footage skewing the film away from a purely documentary function. The question of its truthfulness, however, is not so easy to answer and there are some parallels with observational documentary in this respect. Although appearing to present footage in a way that maintained strict chronology, filmmakers such as Al Maysles frequently edited their films so as to reflect their own view of the events they were recording. In doing so, meaning is teased out through the editing that does not exist directly in the images themselves. For instance, the final shot of tragic bible salesman Paul Brennan in *Salesman* (1968) suggests the narrative conclusion of his downward spiral into self-doubt and disaffection. However, Bruzzi has noted that the footage used here appears to be a composite of two separate events (2006: 77) and Maysles himself acknowledges that 'there is fictionalization there' because the shot itself 'wasn't long enough' so the image was frozen and zoomed in on (Levin 1971: 276). Maysles suggests, however, that 'I'm not saying it makes it any less truthful, because […] people who were there thought it was very representative of what happened' (ibid.). Maysles's subjective version of the truth is arrived at (or manufactured) through creative editing and image manipulation. Jackson's work is similar, creating a version of the 'truth' through these faked images. Hers is an entirely hypothetical

truth, whereas Al Maysles's version is the subjective truth of the filmmaker. However, in terms of presentation, both serve the same function of highlighting an aspect of an event that is felt, but is not directly evident in the documentary audio-visual material alone. There is a resonance here with earlier modes of political satire, such as *Spitting Image*'s infamous Thatcher puppet that treated her Cabinet like naughty school children. As broadcaster Trevor McDonald highlights in the retrospective documentary *Best Ever Spitting Image* (2006),

> I have no idea whether that's the way Margaret Thatcher ran her cabinet, but what it shows is how enduring these caricatures can be. Everybody now believes that that is how she did it.

Indeed, it is frequently argued that the popularity of *Spitting Image*'s grotesque version of Thatcher did her public image no harm and may have even enhanced her own popularity among voters (Price 2010: 264–265; Stewart 2013: 253–254; Turner 2010: 127).

In *Blaired Vision*, numerous significant, and real, people pass comment—in talking-heads style—on the New Labour phenomenon and on various incidents in the life of the New Labour government. However, the co-presence of the Jackson footage means that these views and opinions are far from straightforward, and indeed it often becomes difficult to determine whether the commentators are giving insights into real people and events or whether they are discussing Jackson's fakes. During the section of the programme which deals with Alastair Campbell, for example, Jackson's voyeuristic camera peeks into a media suite, and observes Campbell mocking up the notorious 'Blair's Babes' photograph. This was a publicity stunt where Blair, shortly after becoming prime minister, was photographed surrounded by the female Labour MPs. The 'babes' were, by and large, the result of a specific project of egalitarianism (or the illusion of it), where all-women shortlists were used to select candidates in certain constituencies. This was designed to suggest gender equality, tying in with the wave of 'girl power' sweeping the nation and focused around the popularity of the Spice Girls.

Again, the potentially noble aims of the policy are undercut by Jackson as we see Campbell dictating his wishes to fake-Blair and a graphic designer. This is intercut with real news footage of Campbell, and various talking-heads interviews, including one with Lance Price, who notes that, 'Alastair Campbell dominates any room that he's in […] including meetings that Tony Blair was

at. He's got an opinion on everything.' Cut back to fake-Campbell overseeing the photo composition: 'Right, I want another body here', he points to the left side of the image and a photograph of Margaret Beckett appears, 'Fuck … Ken Dodd's ugly sister! No, chop her fuckin' head off.' As the sequence continues, Campbell's alter-ego undermines the progressive political gesture by being sexist, racist and ableist in equal measure.

The sequence plays on the ironic contradiction that underlines Alastair Campbell's popular media image. Campbell tends to present himself as a calm and articulate (if forthright) contributor whenever he appears on television—whether this as a political pundit on current affairs programmes, as a guest on *The Culture Show* (2004–), or as a panel member on entertainment shows such as *A Question of Sport* (1968, 1970–). However, he is also widely known for his temper. Greg Dyke has described Campbell as 'a deranged, vindictive bastard' (Price 2010: 372), and former *Daily Telegraph* editor Charles Moore has called him 'the most pointlessly combative person in human history' (ibid.: 334). These, and similar, views have leaked through to colour his public image, and it is because of this popular public persona that *The Thick of It*'s Malcolm Tucker and Campbell have become inextricably linked. Tucker's abrasive personality and abusive language—in his first appearance he describes a sitting government minister as being 'as useless as a marzipan dildo'—appear to be manifestations of what we believe the real, unrepressed, Campbell might actually be like behind closed doors. It is this aspect of Campbell's personality—that under the calm exterior is a thoroughly nasty person—that is played on by Jackson.

It is unclear which version of Campbell Price and the other commentators are talking about in *Blaired Vision*'s interview sequences, the real one who appears relatively calm and quiet in the archival material, or the loud, sweary and dominant one from the Jackson footage. Although we probably assume the interviews to be about the real Campbell, they tally more closely to the images we see of fake-Campbell. This uncertainty reinforces the issues surrounding Malcolm Tucker, because whilst, on the surface, the real- and fake-Campbells are quite different, our knowledge of Campbell's reputation means that the fake versions become fused with the reality. Indeed, the fake frequently appears more truthful.

A similar effect can be seen in *Miliband of Brothers* (2010), another semi-documentary (though Corner, Richardson and Parry argue that 'it might best be described as a comedy docudrama' [2012: 34]) in which the background of Labour leadership contenders, brothers Ed and David

Miliband, is explored. Combining clearly dramatised versions of the pair's life with interviews with significant figures in The Labour Party, the programme appears, on the surface at least, to be reasonably simple to decode. However, again there is a porosity of meaning and the programme

> does not so much ask its audience to believe that events might have happened "like this" […] but to play around with the comic fantasy presented in the light of what *is* known about the brothers and their running against each other for office. (ibid.: 36)

The opening (dramatised) scene in which Ed and David arrive at a television studio to be interviewed is frequently interrupted by straight-seeming talking-head interviews. David is annoyed to find that Ed is also to be on the show, at which point the real Neil Kinnock notes that 'David's response to Ed running has, to my astonishment, been deeply resentful.' A succession of similar testimonies follow, mixed with the dramatic sequences, and it is frequently difficult to distinguish whether these are genuine comments about the Milibands, or whether they are responding to the fictionalised versions. As Corner et al. note, this leads us to question the seriousness of the interviews and encourages a sense of 'generic uncertainty' (ibid.).

These examples suggest two things. The first is that the couching of the real within a fiction—whether that be completely fictional or a dramatised version of reality—causes the real to appear to be comment on itself in a more extreme way because it is removed in some ways from reality. Much as Caroline Aherne could get away with asking celebrity guests on her chat show more personal questions when in the guise of Mrs Merton—she famously asked Debbie McGee, 'What first attracted you to the millionaire, Paul Daniels?'—here the various commentators can be more critical because they seem to be discussing the fictionalised versions as much as they are the reality.

To a great extent, this is also how the mockumentary form itself frequently works. The documentary aesthetic allows an extreme, yet still plausible, version of reality to be presented because we know that what we are seeing is not real and that it is, in effect, a *performance* of reality. Texts such as *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *This is Spinal Tap* and *The Thick of It* are all concerned with presenting knowingly skewed versions of reality in ways that are aesthetically similar to how the real world is usually represented by factual media. Just as importantly, however, it stresses the way in which the porosity of the boundary between fact and fiction, most evident within the mockumentary images, highlights the performativity of the public figures for comic purposes.

All of the comic mockumentaries discussed in this book expose, through comically exaggerated imitation, the real performances enacted by public figures in all aspects of everyday life. Jackson's work speculates at the private, off-screen world of her targets, and engages with the different modes of performance evident in a celebrity's behaviour when they are in the public eye and when they are not. Her work highlights the extremes of public performance by transplanting the 'on' celebrity into their private world and demonstrating how ridiculous such performances are when there is nobody to witness them. This is the case in the image of Mick Jagger ironing. Although one would expect such an activity to be conducted in an informal manner, Jagger maintains his on-stage rock star appearance, wearing a combination of spotless white underwear and a pair of sunglasses. The famous Jagger pout is also evident, leading to the extrapolated suggestion that the strutting and face-pulling mannerisms of his on-stage persona are not in fact an act, but how the singer behaves in even the most mundane circumstances. This is a preposterous proposition, but in forwarding such a suggestion Jackson reveals the extreme level of performativity on display when Jagger is in public. The mockumentary image is central to this reinterpretive process, because just seeing the celebrity off guard (or 'on' in an inappropriate space) is not enough. For the images to have impact they have to be imbued with the suggestion that we are observing the 'real' celebrity. Documentary cameras capture real people, not fictional characters, and the mockumentary image comes loaded with this assertion.

Ultimately, the comic mockumentary performs a satirical function by heightening our awareness of the performativity of public figures, whilst making audiences laugh in the process. These texts work by exposing the performative nature of musicians and politicians by openly problematising distinctions between real and fake. By highlighting their own performances of rock and roll, of politics, and of documentary conventions, mockumentary texts question the levels of performance found within wider media discourses of similar figures. The fact that Malcolm Tucker in *The Thick of It* seems to be telling us more about Alastair Campbell than the genuine images of Campbell that we might see in the news, complicates our relationship with these media images. Significantly, it does this through comic means, generating humour from the gulf between the sobering documentary form and the often unlikely 'documentary' subjects' relationship with the reality that is being parodied or satirised. Unlike serious examples of the form, which often engage in a direct and reflexive

criticism of the representational strategies of the documentary—usually through the ability to look so like documentaries that fakery is difficult to detect—the comic mockumentary wears its fakeness on its sleeve. The primary agenda is rarely about openly critiquing the documentary form itself, but utilising the performative nature of documentary subjects for comic purposes.

Notes

1. The reference to 'fatfaced Cameron […] violently masturbating', and the notion of political reality seemingly imitating fiction, converge in 'Piggate', a news story that broke in 2015 in which it was reported that as part of a university initiation ritual, Cameron had placed his penis in the mouth of a dead pig. An ironically similar event had been dramatised by Charlie Brooker in an episode of his dystopian satirical anthology series *Black Mirror* (2011), though Brooker maintains that he had no knowledge of Cameron's actions at the time of producing the episode.
2. Stella Bruzzi makes a link between Dineen's film and the observational documentary *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* (1963), in which Robert Kennedy displays a similarly casual manner, and both films include sequences of the politicians having breakfast with their families (2006: 159–160).
3. *Yes Minister* is frequently referenced in the House of Commons to signal that a political issue is almost beyond belief. This particular example comes from a Commons debate that took place on 10 June 1997 where MP Elfyn Llewyd was discussing a set of 'temporary' traffic lights that had been in place on the A494 for over 18 years. Since the mid-2000s, *The Thick of It* has assumed the mantle of go-to reference point for such events.
4. Although Jackson is most well known for her look-alike work, she also works as a portrait photographer and her website includes a section of portraits of well-known personalities including David Cameron, who has also been the subject of some of Jackson's look-alike work.
5. Jackson explores this aspect of Blair's persona further in *Tony Blair: Rock Star* (2006).

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CHAPTER 6

Campaigning for Authenticity in the Post-Truth Era

Throughout this book I have been concerned with arguing two significant things about mockumentary comedy. First, that the mockumentary does not have a single unified style or mode of address, and that to keep the definition of what constitutes a mockumentary as a broad one provides meaningful avenues through which we can examine the history and purpose of the form. Thus, we can recognise that some mockumentaries rigorously replicate the intricacies of genuine documentary style, whilst others create the 'associated feelings' (Juhasz and Lerner 2006: 7) of documentary by loosely gesturing towards documentary style. The second thing that this book argues is that through its focus on performance (*by* people and *of* aesthetic conventions) the comic mockumentary uses comedy to make visible the performative nature of the public figures (rock stars, politicians, celebrities) and aesthetic modes (documentary, reportage, reality television) that dominate the modern factual media landscape.

This final chapter draws on both of these aspects to explore the concept of authenticity as it applies to both the mockumentary and the politician. Whereas the previous chapter examined British politics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this chapter turns its attention to the United States and takes a somewhat wider sweep of recent political history, focusing on two specific periods—the late 1980s and the mid-to-late 2010s—discussing in detail one mockumentary text from each period (*Tanner '88* [1988] and *Veep* [2012–2018], respectively). Each of these programmes has explicit things to say about the nature of political

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authenticity, though their different temporal contexts mean that they have manifestly different views on the place and meaning of authenticity in the political process, and on how this is articulated by the politician, and by the mockumentary form itself.

The 1980s and the 2010s bookend the mockumentary's popularity as a mainstream media form and *Tanner '88* and *Veep* represent two different, but linked, examples of programme-makers working through their own iteration of mockumentary aesthetics. In exploring these two texts, which also offer particular challenges to any straightforward conceptualisation of the mockumentary, I conclude this book by considering the implications of where the mockumentary has been and where it is now. Just as the performance of authenticity is shown to be a vital part of the political process, so too is it a key component of the mockumentary, and just as the aesthetics of authenticity rehearsed by the mockumentary have evolved, so too have the performances of authenticity on display by our politicians.

Authenticity and Politics

The Guardian caused minor controversy on 9 December 2016 when it included on its front page an image of Donald Trump standing in front of a burning cross and positioned between four hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan (*The Guardian* 2016). As with most of Alison Jackson's other work (see Chap. 5), the photograph was a fake, using a Trump look-alike in order to articulate and extend an aspect of the president-elect's public persona, notably the inherent racism implied by the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-Mexican rhetoric which played a key part of his election campaign (Easterly 2017; Goldstein and Hall 2017; Mangcu 2017).

The prominent position given over to the image by *The Guardian* emphasised the photograph's sensational content, justified as newsworthy on the basis that it drew attention to the supposed threats of legal action towards Jackson. Both the image itself and the context of its presentation contributed to the newspaper's critical characterisation of the businessman, reality television star and soon-to-be most powerful man in the world. Despite being accompanied by a caption which stated that,

> Alison Jackson, the artist famous for satirical photos posed by lookalikes, has self-published images representing Donald Trump, saying she was outraged by lawyers' warnings that a president might sue to restrict artistic freedom.

The image was received in a controversial fashion by the newspaper's readers.

The letters page on the following day features a number of criticisms, including the following:

> How can you run news items and comment on false news […] while the front page of the very same edition bears a false photo of the US president-elect cavorting with, apparently, Ku Klux Klan members? […] as a signed-up supporter of your publication's objective of 'producing quality, independent journalism, which discovers and tells readers the truth', I would have expected better of you. Or are we all (subscribers, supporters, casual front page headline readers) supposed to know the speciality of Alison Jackson's work? (Garrett 2016)

Even though the accompanying caption was explicit about the true status of the image, that wasn't enough to convey the message. When viewed within a 'post-truth' climate populated by so-called 'fake news' and 'alternative facts', running the image on the front page of *The Guardian* was viewed as irresponsible.[1] Embedded within this letter is the particular concern that there was a risk that the photograph of Trump could be read as being authentic. This assumption is not as straightforwardly false as it might seem. On the one hand, the image does not actually depict Trump or a real event and so has no claims to factuality. At the same time, the idea that placing Trump and the KKK in proximity with each other might convey something meaningful about the president's character makes it harder to dismiss as inauthentic given the evidence of his own words (Berney 2017; Osborne 2017).

This example draws us naturally towards the question of authenticity and its place within contemporary politics and society. The body of literature on authenticity is extensive (but see Taylor 1991; Anton 2001; Cobb 2014 for useful starting points) and its meaning widely debated. However, authenticity has a general entanglement with questions of identity and the rigorous formation of a coherent self. Cobb argues that one underlying principle of authenticity is 'a correspondence between what a person says and what he or she truly feels' (2014: 2), or, as Steven Poole notes, 'the perfect conjunction of outward seeming and inward being' (Poole 2013: 28).

Nevertheless, in recent times even this description has been subject to slippage. Authenticity is now as much about exhibiting the *appearance* of such a conjunction as it is a guarantee of its existence. As Cobb argues, where once the term connoted 'the idea of an original, authoritative text' (Cobb 2014: 1), we now find ourselves 'surrounded by the rhetoric of

authenticity', and he gives his breakfast yoghurt which 'proclaims itself to be "authentic Greek yogurt"' (ibid.: 2) as an example. For Poole, this version of authenticity is 'yet another brand value to be baked into the commodity, and customers are happy to take this spectral performance of a presumed virtue as the truth' (2013: 24).

Poole's notion that authenticity can be construed as a performance offers useful ways of thinking about modern politics, and that 'authenticity is all the more prized the more that politics appears to be nothing but spin and posture' (ibid.: 26). Gregory Frame introduces a particular irony into this question of what we might call performative authenticity, noting that

> *what* constitutes political authenticity […] is the fundamental desire to know that, beneath the constructed politician, there exists a real person, with a stable identity and a core set of beliefs to which they remain wedded. (italics as in original) (2016: 757)

It is significant, then, that for a politician to be successful, there must be elements of performance (the politician is 'constructed') and authenticity (a sense that they *do* have a 'core set of beliefs') working in balance. This leads to the paradoxical suggestion that to be successful, a good performance of authenticity is more important than being genuinely authentic.

Numerous documentaries have attempted to explore the presumed space between what Frame calls the '"authentic" essence' and the 'constructed facade' (2016: 756), and we might think here particularly of *Primary* (1960) and *Crisis* (1963), Robert Drew's two direct cinema exposés of the Kennedy administration, and *The War Room* (1993), D. A. Pennebaker's account of Clinton's 1992 election campaign. However, what each of these documentaries have in common is that there remains the problem of gaining access to the subject, the subject's performance for the camera (conscious or unconscious) and the subject's (or their media advisors') control over the final product. In other words, we can rarely be certain that what we see is truly reflective of what we would have seen had the cameras not been there.

Mockumentaries, on the other hand, have no such disadvantage, and make a virtue of their inherent inauthenticity—they are not, after all what they appear to be—to probe the assumptions of aesthetic authenticity that might have once underpinned our understanding of the straight documentary, and interrogate its supposedly authentic nature. Through fictionalisation, the implied performative processes that underpin real political success can be made visible and interrogated. Both *Tanner '88* and *Veep* can capture the image construction process because they have

direct access to the fictionalised backstage spaces of politics and are able to examine—in an apparently documentary way—the balancing act that goes on between simply being, and successfully performing, authenticity.

The two mockumentaries discussed here locate comedy in the exploration of this contradiction, as their respective politicians attempt to balance their core inner views with a public projection which will find favour with voters. *Tanner '88* finds Jack Tanner (Michael Murphy), a decent and principled politician, struggling to convey his authentic commitment to core issues because of his ironic (and paradoxical) reluctance to conform to a media strategy which he believes will compromise his integrity. *Veep* manifests a twenty-first-century sensibility for political ambiguity in the digital media age. Unlike Tanner, who is unable to project his genuine views, Selina Meyer (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) finds herself in a constant fight to appear non-committal on all controversial issues in order to retain support from across the political spectrum. Again and again *Veep* plays out Meyer's struggle to balance political acceptability with her own personal beliefs, which, the show suggests, have very little relevance to her success as a politician. In *Veep*, authenticity is entirely performative.

Both texts are heavy in irony and deeply comic, and this is a result of their style. Both *Tanner '88* and *Veep* have a mockumentary aesthetic which encourages a 'documentary mode of engagement', to adopt a phrase used by Bill Nichols (1991: 25), Jane Roscoe (2000: 5) and Annette Hill (2008). However, their respective styles are also fluid, breaking out of the constraints that the strict mimicry of documentary conventions would impose. Neither programme has an explicitly acknowledged camera crew, though the documentary-like quality of the images implies its existence. Neither programme includes voice-over narration or talking-head interviews, and archival material, where it does appear, only ever does so as it is presented from one character to another. The editing of both texts veers at times towards something more conventionally dramatic, though I will suggest later in this chapter that *Veep*'s editing opens up new avenues for thinking about the question of mockumentary editing in general, particularly its relationship to sitcom performance.

Instead, *Tanner '88* and *Veep* both embody a looseness of mockumentary style that is also evident in other texts discussed in this book, particularly *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *The Thick of It* (2005–2012), which challenge the boundaries of the mockumentary and open up fruitful avenues of investigation. My discussion of *Tanner* explores a 'naïve' mockumentary text produced before the form's aesthetic mainstreaming, while

Veep is a text produced in the wake of this mainstreaming and thus responds to the audience's familiarity with fact–fiction hybrid comedy. The purpose and specific stylistic aspects are different in each case, but the looseness in their performance of documentary's aesthetic claims to authenticity offers further ways of thinking about the mockumentary not yet addressed either in this book or elsewhere.

Given the importance of authenticity to recent political history, it is unsurprising that it has formed the underlying thematic drive of numerous fictional films and television programmes. Frame's excellent analysis of authenticity in fictional representation of US election campaigns has begun to excavate this rich seam in terms of drama, but comedy remains relatively untouched. Like the members of Spinal Tap mistakenly believing themselves to be outstanding heavy metal artists, political mockumentary comedy plays on the distinction between the inner reality and outward appearance that underpins political authenticity. It is not insignificant that this drive mirrors the mockumentary's own dynamics or fictional/comic interior, factual/sober exterior. The rest of this chapter examines how comedy is created through the mockumentary's stylistic examination of political authenticity in *Tanner '88* and *Veep*.

Tanner '88: Authenticity in the 'Post-Truth' Age

Written by the cartoonist Garry Trudeau and directed by Robert Altman, *Tanner '88* is a television comedy drama serial which follows Jack Tanner's fictional campaign to be nominated as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate for the 1988 election. The programme's eleven episodes were produced for, and broadcast sporadically on, HBO, and closely followed the real events of the 1988 US election cycle. The first episode, in which Tanner campaigns in New Hampshire, was broadcast four days prior to the genuine primary election in that state, and other episodes followed the course of the election with similar proximity, hence its uneven broadcast schedule. As Joanne Morreale notes, 'shows were shot and edited up until the last possible moment' in order to 'convey a sense of immediacy and to keep up with current events' (2008: 103), a technique that is common to news and current affairs media, but also to political satire.

The confluence of subject matter and production schedule suited an observational documentary-style aesthetic, much as the short time scale, low budget and day-in-the-life narrative had directed Walter Shenson and Richard Lester's thinking with *A Hard Day's Night*. There is no diegetic camera crew explicitly acknowledged in *Tanner*, leading Craig Hight to

exclude it from his consideration of television mockumentaries (2010: 148). However, both Morreale (2008: 108) and Altman himself (Hoover 1994: 74) view *Tanner* as a mockumentary and it clearly exhibits the form and function of one. Indeed, Morreale argues that *Tanner*'s innovative style—which she suggests offers a combination of docudrama and mockumentary conventions (2008: 107–108)—was significant in helping to 'brand HBO as "quality" television' (ibid.: 113) in much the same way as I argued that the form had done, roughly contemporaneously, with Channel 4 in the UK (see Chap. 1). Numerous real political figures appear within the diegesis, including Bob Dole, Pat Robertson and Kitty Dukakis. At such moments, the real and fictional campaigns collide, Jack Tanner briefly enters the real world of politics and the 'real' politicians are shown to be dramatisations. As Morreale notes, at these moments, both the real and the fictional politicians 'are equally […] inauthentic' (ibid.: 114).

The tight turn-around time meant that much of the programme was improvised around loosely outlined scenes (ibid.: 107) and so '[i]ts visual style gives the impression of spontaneity, unpredictability, and unplanned observation' (ibid.: 114). Furthermore, the immediacy of the approach is augmented by video-based shooting. In a contemporaneous review, Richard T. Jameson suggested that

> [v]ideo is the medium of the Six o'clock news; the mobile minicam is an earnest of veracity and immediacy. It accords perfectly with Altman's desires to erase the barriers between fact(oid) and fiction, to "find out what the political process is by joining it". (1988: 74)

As the rest of this book has argued, the process of spontaneously filming improvised performances is a common production process of many mockumentary comedies and this 'liveness' brings the recording process into close proximity with that of genuine documentary. Another convention that *Tanner* shares with other mockumentaries is that the documentary elements are heightened so as to address 'viewers who know that what they are seeing is not "real"' whilst also indicating documentary's 'arbitrary and constructed nature' (Morreale 2008: 109).

Frame notes that the programme follows Tanner's 'spectacularly unsuccessful attempt […] to win the Democratic Party's presidential nomination while staying true to his beliefs and maintaining control of his image' (2016: 764). The question of authenticity and of the relationship between Tanner's inner self and his public persona is at the heart of *Tanner '88*. This dynamic finds its comic impetus through the difficulty Tanner has in balancing his own views as an intellectual politician (he has a PhD) with

the projection of that authority in an accessible manner. *Tanner '88*'s working through of this tension between rational argument, backed up by empirical and statistical evidence, and accessible, emotional engagement is also an attempt to grapple with the contemporary moment of politics, which in recent times has come to be known as 'post-truth'.

The idea that contemporary politics exhibits a 'post-truth' condition was first articulated by Steve Tesich in a 1992 article for *The Nation*, where he posits that the stream of bad news inflicted upon the American public throughout the 1960s and 1970s (the political assassinations of JFK, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Vietnam, the Watergate Scandal) led ordinary citizens 'to shy away from the truth' (1992: 12). As Tesich argues, '[w]e came to equate truth with bad news and we didn't want bad news anymore, no matter how true or vital to our health as a nation' (ibid.). The corollary of this, as Tesich thought it applied to the USA in 1992, was that the so-called free people of the United States had willingly divested themselves of agency and access to the truth in order to protect their sense of self-esteem. Tesich's brutal conclusion was that the American people were

> rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world. (Ibid.: 13)[2]

Tesich was writing about the precise moment in American politics—the late 1980s—in which *Tanner* was produced. Since then, the definition of post-truth politics has shifted slightly. In 2016 Oxford Dictionaries nominated 'post-truth' as their word of the year, expressing this shifting definition as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (2017). Post-truth entered the popular lexicon in that year, with the rise in usage attributable to the wider context of assertions of Russian intervention (through so-called 'fake news') in that year's US election and the demonising of the Remain campaign's empirical arguments against the UK leaving the European Union as 'project fear'. Within the context of this last example, the then Secretary of State for Justice (and prominent pro-Brexit MP) Michael Gove's statement on Sky News that

the British people had 'had enough of experts' seems to be the epitome of a post-truth attitude; don't trust the experts, go with your gut.

Although *Tanner* was broadcast at a time when there was no vernacular for what we might now recognise as post-truth politics, it was made in a post-truth context, and its narrative articulates the tension between the marshalling of evidence as a persuasive and honest mechanism to win votes and the more manipulative approach of playing to the emotions of voters. This duality between evidence and emotion is bound up in the performance of authenticity and emerges as a focus point for comedy, with any imbalance resulting in a comic failure of authenticity.

Richard T. Jameson describes Tanner as

> a thoughtful, quietly ironical guy half-bemused and half-appalled at the process of modern politicking, willing to play the electoral game but mindful of its ethical hazards and how short it falls of serving the grandeur of democracy. (1988: 74)

Indeed, the programme's effectiveness is founded on the fact that on paper Tanner could be the perfect president; he is principled, honest, ethically sound and driven. In short, as his campaign slogan asserts, he is 'For Real'. However, Frame (2016) argues that the difficulty that Tanner faces is how to insert his particular form of authenticity into a media environment which Hoover suggests 'has reduced the political process to a level of mindless slogans, trivial issues, and meaningless simulations' (1994: 71). Tanner's ultimate failure is not that he is inauthentic, but that he is 'unable to *perform* authenticity' (Frame 2016: 766), and the positive aspects of his persona are erased once they are forced into the standard media agenda.

Tanner is shown repeatedly failing to gain traction with voters because his uncomfortable attempts to appeal emotionally contrast with his natural inclination to convey policy and evidence at an intellectual level. Tanner's apparent inauthenticity is replicated by the inauthenticity of Altman's mockumentary style, the looseness of which gestures strongly towards documentary without committing itself to direct imitation. This mockumentary inauthenticity becomes one of the tools with which political authenticity itself is interrogated. Scenes play out in a way that initially appears to be straight-laced documentary explorations of particular scenarios: a television interview; a farm visit; a photo opportunity with a quilting circle. However, much as Tanner's inability to perform authenticity works against him, so the inauthentic mockumentary image does the same, rebelling against documentary's presumed status as objective record.

As Tanner's inauthenticity becomes apparent, documentary's stylistic conventions are also breached, and the mockumentary mischievously turns against him by converting his inauthenticity into comedy.

This pattern is established from the opening seconds of the first episode when Tanner appears on *Newsline*, a New Hampshire-based news programme. The interview sets him up as a credible candidate, and the images that we see collapse the distinction between the live television feed and the mockumentary image. Both Tanner and the mockumentary appear authentic. However, this is upset once Tanner's intellectual credentials are brought up. The interviewer (Jack Heath) asks whether Tanner's possession of a PhD makes him 'feel smarter than some of the other people running for president'. Without hesitating Tanner turns to Heath, nods and simply says, 'Yes', before looking to the audience and laughing as if to emphasise the insincerity of his response. For a moment we are laughing with Tanner, but his staccato punchline is undermined by a sharp cut-away from the interview—and from the mockumentary's alignment with the television feed—and the focus becomes *Tanner '88*'s theme song. This is a jaunty musical Frankenstein, mixing together American standards and notable historical campaign songs (such as Sinatra's version of 'High Hopes' that soundtracked Kennedy's election victory in 1960). Although it becomes clear that the song exists within the diegesis of the series, here it serves a non-diegetic function, by punctuating—and puncturing—Tanner's joke. Without the cut-away, Tanner's response would carry as a suitably effective articulation of his dry wit. However, the sound edit removes the audience's response, and for a second the absurd music is paired with an image of Tanner's smiling face. The abrupt editing highlights the difficult tension located around the qualifications that make Tanner suitable for public office, but which also symbolise his membership of the so-called political 'elite'. Tanner's credibility is built up and cut down by a visual style that emphasises its documentary credentials through its proximity with television news, before breaking free from these constraints and employing aural and visual editing techniques for comic effect.

In a later sequence Tanner and his daughter Alex (Cynthia Nixon) visit the home of 'Farmer Bob' (Robert Gerringer). When Bob tells Tanner that he is 'probably gonna vote for Dudakis [*sic*]', Tanner is unable to resist his intellect taking over, and the camera lingers on an awkward two-shot as Tanner suggests, 'Well, now, you don't wanna vote for a guy unless you know his name.' Unlike in the work of Christopher Guest, where comedy is frequently extracted from the lingering pauses that

underline a moment of comic absurdity at the end of a scene, here Altman takes the opposite approach, editing sharply between scenes to punctuate moments of comedy. The awkwardness of Bob and Tanner's conversation is exacerbated by cutting away from Bob's bewildered face in a manner which highlights his puzzled expression and emphasises that he doesn't get Tanner's wisecrack. This rough, documentary-like editing is effective because the viewer is given enough time to register the improvised comic moment, but not enough time for the moment to feel anything other than spontaneous.

The final punchline to the sequence comes when Tanner signs Bob's autograph book. Having warned Bob not to vote for somebody whose name he doesn't know, Tanner is 'framed', in both senses of the word, by the mockumentary image as Bob looks first of all down at the book—'Jack Tanner?' he queries—then off-screen towards his wife as he asks, 'Who's that?' Again, the probing camerawork and the cutting add emphasis to this moment, conveying the sense that Tanner's contribution has actually devalued Bob's autograph collection.[3]

Elsewhere in the first episode, Tanner's campaign team work to finesse a campaign video that has been put together by Deke Connors (Matt Malloy), a cameraman with aspirations to be an experimental filmmaker. The screening of the 'Jack Tanner Presidential Bio Film' forms the centrepiece of the programme's commentary on Tanner's quest for authenticity and Altman offers a probing interrogation of ways in which emotional connections are encouraged through the structural techniques of documentary filmmaking in the political campaign film.

The film is actually seen twice in the episode, once when the campaign team (and the audience of *Tanner '88*) see the rough cut, and again later in the episode when it is shown to a focus group. The first viewing is straightforwardly comic and we experience it from two perspectives. For much of the first part, the images that we see are aligned with the film itself. The timecoded film begins with a test card of colour bars, signifying both its unfinished status and that we are being given direct access to the film itself. Once again, the 'documentary' image (the campaign film) and the mockumentary image (*Tanner '88*) are collapsed into one. Sonically, however, the two are not aligned because in addition to hearing the film's soundtrack we also overhear the campaign team's commentary.

The competing, over-speaking voices are typical of Altman's style and convey a sense that what we are hearing are off-the-cuff responses. Indeed, Hoover suggests that this might actually have been the first time that the

cast saw the tape (1994: 80). As the film progresses, the team's critique grows more intense and the commentary begins to overtake the film's soundtrack. In accordance with this, our view becomes detached from the film itself and is increasingly mediated through a series of viewpoints located behind and within the campaign team as they watch the rough cut on a bank of monitors.

The film is intended to raise Tanner's profile with voters by providing an overview of his background and his politics. It also, of course, serves this purpose for the viewer of *Tanner '88*. However, Frame describes it as 'the definition of inauthenticity' (2016: 765), and it unfolds as a hilariously inept combination of Deke's artistic pretensions and Tanner's inability to perform authenticity. The unsteady left-to-right hand-held camera picks out Tanner shovelling snow in front of a large suburban house, *mise en scène* which T.J. Cavanaugh (Pamela Reed), Tanner's campaign manager, is unhappy about: 'I thought he was going to be raking leaves. People vote in November, you know?'[4] From the start, authenticity is raised as a key concern for the team: it is unlikely to be snowing in October and November, so running a campaign film in which a candidate is seen shovelling snow will feel out of kilter and not 'of the moment'. Deke's off-screen rebuttal—'I can't control the weather!'—misses the point that the indexical authenticity embedded in the fact that it *was* snowing when the recording was made does not supersede the fact that it is unlikely to be snowing when the film will be broadcast.

The nit-picking of this small detail is overshadowed by the inauthenticity of Tanner's performance that follows. He pretends to notice the camera and stops shovelling in order to address it: 'Hi, how are you? Good to see you.' It is a moment of intensely awkward, inauthentic over-performance that is reminiscent of Marty DiBergi's opening monologue to camera at the start of *This is Spinal Tap* (discussed in Chap. 3). However, unlike DiBergi's introduction, which at least feels spontaneous and full of enthusiasm for his subject, Tanner's address is flat and stilted. The performance highlights its artifice, something exacerbated by its contrast to the hand-held documentary-like style's aesthetic claims of authenticity. That we are also seeing this diegetic documentary through the lens of Altman's mockumentary camera increases the rhetorical distance and there are three levels of performance converging: Tanner's stilted self-performance shows up his artificiality; Deke's forced performance of observational documentary style creates an ironic counterpart to Tanner's forced acting with its aesthetic claims of documentary truth; and Altman's mockumentary style casts a critical eye over both processes.

The difficulty that Tanner has balancing his intellectual agenda with the need to appear approachable to voters is replicated by Deke's inability to balance his artistic pretentions with the requirements of a functional promotional film. Instead of injecting any personality into the film by allowing Tanner to express his own beliefs, wishes and policies, the film instead mirrors Tanner's own deficiencies by presenting the candidate primarily through an overly intellectualised editing schema that is so excessive as to be entirely, though unintentionally, comical.

This humorous inflection exaggerates and exposes the grammar of genuine political campaign films to scrutiny. For instance, Deke represents Tanner's father's war service with an archival clip of army personnel, which he admits to having lifted from one of Bob Dole's old campaign films. Again, Deke's flawed artistic, aesthetic and intellectual instincts trump the internal logic of the campaign film. He defends the decision to use the footage by arguing that Dole himself would have lifted it from 'stock', it being unlikely that 'they sent a crew out to film a future wounded president'. However, he misses the wider ironic implications of his own actions: that the footage becomes meaningless if it can be transplanted from one candidate to another, especially when those people hold radically different political views.

As with the discussion of the performative aspect of politicians and rock stars elsewhere in this book, the sequence demonstrates the ways in which campaign films are themselves performances of documentary conventions. The reused 'Dole' footage performs a particular function for Tanner's team that is paradoxically both vastly different and shockingly similar to its original purpose. On the one hand the footage fulfils a fundamentally different purpose to Dole's film—one is used to bolster Democratic politics, the other Republican—and both are different to the original footage, which acts as a visual record of real people undertaking real war-based tasks. Both Dole's and Tanner's campaign teams strip these tasks of their substance and through their recontextualisation in campaign videos aligned with specific political candidates, they quite literally erase the identities of the individuals within the original stock footage.

In this way, Dole and Tanner are both undertaking the same process, and the footage becomes a palimpsest where the individual identity of a specific soldier (or basketball player, or protestor) can be wiped away and replaced by that of Tanner or Dole or any other politician, real or fictional, at the whim of the media strategist. As Keith Beattie argues, the use of such 'generic shots' in standard documentary 'points to a crisis of representation

in which, effectively, archival footage is stripped of any evidentiary function' (2004: 140). Thus, the truth contained in the archival image is replaced by an emotionally charged 'post-truth' version, communicated through the association of the politician with someone else's history and sold through its documentary form. This process does great violence to the archive, a violence that is usually rendered invisible within the generic conventions of the campaign film and the expository documentary. Here, however, it is made visible through a process of comic exaggeration, which offers *yet another* example of the same archive being reappropriated, this time for the purpose of comic reflection. Ironically, then, Deke's borrowing of the footage without a second thought—something treated comically and critically by the mockumentary text—is not dissimilar to Altman's own use of the *same* footage, though at least he makes it clear that the 'unknown' soldier is neither Tanner nor Dole.

A similarly intellectual approach is taken to 'associate [Tanner] with the big guys'. His claims for generational leadership are signalled through a montage containing extracts of JFK's 'Ask not what you can do' speech, Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech, a photograph of Neil Armstrong on the moon, footage of young people protesting and a close-up of the cover of The Beatles 'album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. This is clearly an attempt to appeal to the emotions of voters; they like those people/things, so will instinctively like Tanner. However this is a fundamentally intellectual exercise that overcomplicates the message. The bombardment of over the top, clichéd images is highly comic and fails (with less comic results) under the scrutiny of the focus group who respond negatively to the abstracted images. Deke's over-intellectualisation means that the audience view the film *as* manipulation: 'They're all other people's ideas. Where are his ideas?'; 'If ideas are his currency, let's see his currency'; 'I need a little more substance.' Tanner himself is not given space to speak on these issues and is virtually erased from his own campaign film.

The humour that is created through the depiction of each of Deke's poor decisions acts to make visible the structural choices that underpin much documentary work, especially that which combines various types of audio-visual material from a range of sources. However, more than anything else, humour is derived from the repeated failure to manufacture authenticity. Deke's choices are poor ones because the over-reliance on intellectual filmmaking processes means that: (1) Tanner appears to be a

hollow entity, constructed entirely through ideas found within archive footage and in the juxtaposition of images; and as a result (2) the film reflects Tanner's own flaws, rather than being a vehicle to overcome them.

The implications of Deke's failures are made clear when the film is shown a second time for the focus group. The sequence has comic undertones, but this time we are not laughing at the film itself, but at the disaster that unfolds. The audience responds well to the few sequences in which Tanner is allowed to speak openly. 'They're responding to his face, he's got a great face', the analyst (Dr David Hughes) confirms, acknowledging the authenticity that lies within what Karen Lury calls the 'drama of the human face' (2005: 17) and demonstrating that Deke's intuition to avoid using Tanner himself is deeply flawed. However, in general the film is seen as manipulative. The focus group laugh at the same beats that we (and Tanner's team) did the first time around, and the scene exhibits a tragicomic tone as these aspects become dips on an approval graph, effectively sinking the campaign's prospects.

The opening episode concludes with Tanner delivering an impassioned diatribe about his political convictions to his campaign team. He argues persuasively for his claim to generational leadership in a manner that is both emotional and well-informed. It is the only point during the entire series where he manages to strike the right balance between these two positions, and he does so without any prior preparation. His diatribe is authentic because, for once, he is not trying to construct an image for the media, or mitigate his intellectual leanings; there is no distinction between Tanner's inner beliefs and his performance of them. Deke captures the speech on video, but in order to conceal the camera has to shoot through a patterned glass table. Tanner's face is fragmented by the table and with it the image that would convey authenticity. Campaign films such as this are designed to be played out on television, which, as John Ellis reminds us, has historically prioritised the face as its key site of meaning and which encourages a sense of 'equality and even intimacy' (1992: 131). In failing to attend to the importance of Tanner's face as a key component of the medium in which he is working, Deke greatly undermines the ability to convey the politician's authenticity. When Deke confirms that he managed to capture it on camera, we know—as we see much of Tanner's rant through the lens of Deke's camera—that he has only 'got it' in as much as it aligns with his avant-garde leanings and that the footage is basically unusable as campaign material.

By the following episode Deke's original campaign film has been ditched in favour of short television spots extracted from the covert recording. This strategy is only marginally more successful, and as Frame notes,

> [t]hey think that capturing and broadcasting this unscripted diatribe […] will enable them to deliver this uncomplicated, straightforward, 'authentic' Tanner to the electorate […] However, the attempt is a failure primarily because it has to be reinserted into the conveyor belt of campaign politics. (2016: 766)

When T.J. and Stringer watch the promo go out on a bar-room television, they witness the general bafflement of the casually watching crowd and admit that they might only have succeeded in attracting the 'What the fuck was that?' vote.

Ultimately, Tanner's failure is that he is only capable of being authentic and honest in private, not of performing authenticity and honesty publicly without over-intellectualising. This is clearly understood by Tanner and his team and when, in the second episode, Tanner concedes that '[t]o be natural is one thing, but to try to *appear* that way is a contradiction in terms […] It's an invitation to self-deception; to hide reality from ourselves', he is articulating the kind of performative authenticity that is at the centre of this chapter. The use of the hidden camera footage doesn't prove Tanner's authenticity. Instead it exposes his inability to perform authenticity in something more slick and professional looking.

The first episode, and Tanner's diatribe, ends on an ironic note. Tanner impresses because his impassioned conviction regarding his claims to generational leadership are grounded in having an answer to a very simple question: 'Who is your favourite Beatle?' This was a question supposedly asked by Alex Tanner to Joe Biden, Gary Hart and Michael Dukakis at the Democratic Leadership conference, and for Tanner it is emblematic of the way in which the concepts of personal and political authenticity should intertwine. According to Tanner, Hart struggled to remember a name, Biden said that he preferred jazz, and Dukakis opted for Paul because 'he liked his wife'. Tanner argues that he has no idea if Alex has an answer to her own question, but states that

> I sure as hell did, and I knew for sure that anybody who didn't had absolutely no claim to generational leadership. Now I must have ten years on Joe Biden, but damn it, he wasn't paying attention back then, and I was.

The important point for Tanner is that politicians of that generation should have a genuine conviction for the cultural politics of that moment, and that not having a view demonstrates a lack of authenticity going forward.

This sequence in *Tanner* is not particularly amusing—it marks the exhilarating point at which Tanner looks like he might have a genuine chance of future success. However, it does contain one dramatic sucker-punch which has a retrospectively comic function. Tanner ends his diatribe by answering, finally, Alex's question: 'the right answer is John Lennon'. This response underlines just how divorced Deke is from the politician whose views he is supposed to be projecting with the promotional film. Although Deke's use of the *Sgt. Pepper* album cover in the campaign video to symbolise Tanner's claims to generational leadership chimes broadly with Tanner's own view, as the restless camera closes in on the foursome he—once again—makes the wrong choice, ending up on a large close-up: of Paul.

Tanner '88 exposes the inauthenticity of political campaigning. It does this through the exploration of Tanner's own failure to adequately convey his authentic views through performance, and in doing so emphasises the good performances that underpin all successful politicians. This is articulated through an ambivalent mockumentary image that repeatedly turns on Tanner and the straight documentary form in comic ways, offering a sceptical interrogation of the documentary image's ability to adequately live up to its promise of objective factuality. Ironically, the looseness of style offers greater insight into the political process than the apparently straightforwardly documentary images do.

Jack Tanner has real conviction, but finds it impossible to convey this in a way that feels authentic to voters, and comedy comes from his failure to balance his instinctive intellectual approach with the politically fruitful post-truth approach of appealing to emotional concerns. *Veep* takes an opposing view, suggesting that political success in the twenty-first century does not come from a strong articulation of authentic personal beliefs, but of the suppression of authenticity in the service of a politics of ambiguity.[5]

Veep: A Politics of Ambiguity

Like Tanner, the central character of *Veep*, Vice-President Selina Meyer, has personal beliefs and convictions. However, the landscape of twenty-first-century politics has created a context in which it is often fruitful for

Meyer to hide these views in favour of a more ambiguous position. This, of course, has an impact on her projection of authenticity. If we return to Frame's formulation of authenticity as the knowledge that 'beneath the constructed politician, there exists a real person, with a stable identity and a core set of beliefs to which they remain wedded' (2016: 757), then there is something decidedly inauthentic about that politician suppressing those core beliefs so as to appeal at a universal level.

Modern politicians are increasingly reliant on ambiguity as a strategy for attracting voters from across the political spectrum. Filipe Teles argues that the velocity and changeability of modern politics 'may influence individuals in leadership positions to be more *prone to ambiguity*' (italics as in original) (2015: 31). Teles suggests that despite there being a requirement 'to set clear policy objectives and to present comprehensible strategies to attain them, leaders may prefer to misrepresent these and to adopt more indistinct and vague actions', so as to allow 'greater opportunities to adapt in the future and more chances to satisfy different individuals' (ibid.).

In *Veep*, Meyer's adoption of a politics of ambiguity results in the strategic hiding of personal belief in order to maintain professional credibility. This, however, is a finely balanced equation. If a politician does hold a firm personal view, being too ambiguous risks suggesting that they actually support the opposite position. A further difficulty is navigating the fine line between ambiguity and uncertainty, the latter of which, Teles observes, is a clear sign of weakness (ibid.: 33). The trouble for the world of political leadership, real and fictional, is that ambiguity leaves politicians open to the charge of vacuity. It is the fear of alienating voters by taking a firm position that leads to the familiarly awkward sight of a politician appearing on television to say nothing of substance and to fail to answer simple and direct questions.

This examination of *Veep* attempts to understand how comedy is used to highlight this particularly ironic aspect of modern political life. In doing so, it also addresses the modern mockumentary sitcom form, suggesting that the strict adherence to documentary style is almost intangible. Instead the experience of watching *Veep* is an inherently 'mockumentary' one, the 'documentary-ness' of the contemporary mockumentary form coming from the displacement of the documentary viewing experience into a number of generically adopted mockumentary tropes, most notably, multiple-camera shooting on hand-held cameras, frantic editing which matches the rawness of the hand-held footage, and a reorientation of the relationship between camera, character and diegetic (and non-diegetic)

space. This shift is the most recent point in the mainstreaming and streamlining of the mockumentary form that has been addressed throughout this book, and the argument I put forward here is that rather than seeing a movement away from the mockumentary, texts such as *Veep*, *Modern Family* (2009–) and *The Thick of It* all display a loose adherence to documentary style, and these are in fact simply the most recent iteration of the mockumentary form. *Veep*'s aesthetically ambiguous relationship with the straight documentary mirrors the political ambiguity that it seeks to interrogate.

Like its British cousin *The Thick of It* (both shows were created by Armando Iannucci), *Veep*'s episodic structure sees Meyer and her team dealing with a different crisis in each episode.[6] However, throughout the programme's third, fourth and fifth seasons, Meyer is involved in prolonged campaigns to become US president, and so these episodic issues feed into a larger story structure. The general narrative drive is towards fighting potential media firestorms as Meyer navigates a number of key, but largely insoluble, policy issues. The programme locates much of its comedy in the articulation of inauthenticity and hypocrisy that surrounds Meyer's attempts to balance her personal convictions with the public need to appear neutral. One episode sees her attempts to connect with voters on a personal level by going on a 'soap box' tour undermined when the press discover that the crate from which she delivers her speeches is reinforced with titanium—so she 'won't fall through'—at a cost of $1200. In another episode, her drive for universal child care is compromised when she finds out pursuing such a policy will cost her significant support in the upcoming election, and in a third, a deal to procure 50,000 tablet computers for school children comes at the cost of a major tax break for a multinational corporation.

Almost every episode of the show involves such a conflict, but my analysis here focuses on a short sequence from the third season episode 'The Choice'. This season of *Veep* follows the early stages of Meyer's leadership campaign following the announcement that the sitting president will not be running for a second term. 'The Choice', the season's second episode, unfolds as Meyer is beginning to formulate her campaign strategy, but before she has officially announced her candidacy, and so it is a pivotal episode in which she begins to position herself within a wider field of candidates.

In the episode, the issue of abortion is raised when the outgoing president makes an after-dinner speech in which he confirms his support for the

20-week cut-off period, adding that 'it's time we give back a little freedom to those who cannot choose'. This conflicts with his government's established position and puts him in personal opposition with Meyer, who recognises her insoluble situation: 'If I say that I am pro-life, then I am a traitor to my sex. If I say that I'm pro-choice, then I'm a traitor to the president. Which makes me an actual traitor.' The episode revolves around Meyer's attempts to remain true to her own pro-choice convictions without appearing to take a stand that will either contradict the president or alienate potential voters. The action unfolds over a single night, from around 10 p.m. in the evening, when the president makes his speech, to Meyer's live appearance on breakfast television the following morning to respond to his comment. The key concern for her strategic team is the formulation of an appropriate statement that acts both to subdue the controversy and position her favourably within the emerging field of challengers to the presidency, each of whom take the president's statement as an opportunity to forward their own political agendas.

Meyer's bafflement at the president's change in position underlines the question of transparency and authenticity that underpins the episode. Even though it conflicts with his own personal view, the president has managed to convincingly sell the idea that he is pro-choice to both the American people and his closest political allies. Meyer does not recognise this as a successful, if cynical, performance of authenticity. Instead, she narcissistically views the president's flip-flop as a sign of 'POTUS trying to screw me', and she describes his statement as 'the unflushable turd that is left in the can for the next person. E.g. me.' For Meyer this is a vindictive act on the part of a departing president, not a successful performance of authenticity giving way to a stance of personal integrity in retirement.

There is the added difficulty of balancing her views with her gender. Mike McLintock (Matt Walsh), Meyer's Director of Communications, suggests that her statement could begin with the phrase 'As a woman I believe that…', so as to add legitimacy to her response. This, Meyer emphatically, and absurdly, rejects by stating that 'I can't identify myself as a woman! People can't know that. Men hate that. And women who hate women hate that, which, I believe, is most women.' A deep absurdity is present in Meyer's preferred manner of presentation: a visibly identifiable woman in a position of leadership, speaking openly on a gendered subject, whilst attempting to be ambiguous about her own readily apparent gender and her previously stated position on the issue.

The politics of ambiguity is thus excruciatingly visible throughout the episode. George Maddox (Isiah Whitlock Jr), one of Meyer's potential opponents, scoops the vice-president to the first statement but adopts a deliberately meaningless and ambiguous position so as not to deny his religious leanings. The key sequence of the episode occurs in the aftermath of this statement, demonstrating how *Veep* articulates its comic critique of this politics of ambiguity through a mockumentary aesthetic with a similarly ambiguous relationship to straight documentary. Meyer and her core team—McLintock, Dan Egan (Reid Scott) her Deputy Director of Communications, Amy Brookheimer (Anna Chlumsky) her Chief of Staff, and Ben Cafferty (Kevin Dunn) the president's Chief of Staff—are discussing the issue in a large office space within the vice-president's suite of offices. This is a working office and other workers can be seen busy at computers in the background. McLintock and Egan take turns reading sentences of Maddox's speech from their phones, the image cutting so that the focus stays with the speaker:

McLintock: Science may give us the map, but we are lost without morality's compass.
Egan: The right to free speech includes the right to free thought.
McLintock: I can't in all consciousness politicize this as an issue.

Meyer declares Maddox to have 'fucking fudged it' and that the very existence of the statement means that 'now we know he's running for president, that stupid bastard'. The statement does, however, increase the pressure on Meyer to make her own views public and a conflict erupts between Meyer, who wants to take more time to consider a measured response, and Egan, who suggests that simply picking a number of weeks of foetal development from within a range that the team have deemed to be acceptable will be enough. Egan loses his temper, swearing at the assembled group, attacking Meyer's immobility and throwing a marker pen across the office, a series of actions that shocks the team and results in his firing.

Although the content of the scene is significant in terms of narrative development, what interests me here is the way in which these developments are communicated through style. I will explore the effect of this in some detail shortly, but it is worth first of all conveying a more descriptive sense of what the sequence looks like. The reading of Maddox's statement is covered by cutting between a number of shots of the speakers (and of

Meyer reacting) taken from a series of different camera positions, most of which are located outside of the group space and all of which exhibit a number of documentary-like characteristics. The medium shots of McLintock reading from his phone are partially obscured on the left and lower edges by objects located between the camera and its subject, imbuing the image with the voyeuristic character of observational documentary. When Egan takes up the reading of Maddox's statement, the shot begins with the final movements of a whip pan, the camera operator seemingly responding on the fly—and wildly—to the new speaker. Although the repeated images of Meyer seated in a chair are relatively stable, they still exhibit the characteristic shake of hand-held documentary camerawork. At the end of the statement's recitation a wide shot of the whole group is subject to a constant process of reframing, the operator panning unsteadily to incorporate Egan in the background of its left-hand edge, his head slumped in frustration.

Nevertheless, the sequence exhibits a clear tension between documentary and dramatic conventions. Wide shots help to establish the space and orientate the viewer in a typically dramatic manner. However, the closer views divide the space in a giddying fashion that is more like documentary, and not dissimilar to what John Caughie calls docudrama's 'documentary gaze' (2000: 110–112). Although the use of multiple cameras does not conform to the conventions of observational documentary, the rawness of the positions do, and the apparently unstructured and responsive movements shun standard dramatic conventions of analytical and continuity editing.

In fact, the quality of 'responsiveness' is a key aspect of contemporary mockumentary form. This goes beyond the simple emulation of a hand-held 'shaky-cam' aesthetic. Instead the constant reframing and unstructured movements suggest a camera that lacks omniscience. Instead of knowing what is to be filmed in advance, as is the case with most film and television dramas, the mockumentary image conveys a sense of spontaneity and of discovery, like the cameraperson of observational documentary, who responds in an unplanned and unstructured way to what is occurring before them. Thus the point of view of the camera is dislocated from the characters, and is able to make discoveries (and connections) within the diegesis separately from them, and make them visible to the audience. This dislocation is a common aspect of fiction films, the ending of *Citizen Kane* (1941) being perhaps the most famous example. Here, however, the style communicates the sense that the information we are seeing was

not known *by the camera* until this moment. The audience and the camera (and its operator) are gaining knowledge together and this is communicated through the impression of responsiveness.

This sense of responsiveness is highly visible in the second half of the sequence as the conflict between Egan and Meyer escalates. Their opposing positions on how to deal with the issue—Meyer's indecision, Egan's frustrated skittishness at this inaction—structure the visual dynamics of the sequence. As should already be apparent, the sequence is visually dynamic, with fast-paced cutting between numerous camera positions. However, it is telling that despite this dynamism Meyer is repeatedly seen through a return to the same medium shot, her stagnation in decision-making communicated through her immobility in the chair and the repetition of the same camera position. In contrast, Egan's frustration is not so easily contained. Every time he appears on screen it is either from a new camera position, or from an existing one significantly reframed, with this reframing usually included as a key component of the shot. His diatribe is signalled visually by his left arm breaking the frame boundaries of yet another repetition of the composed medium shot of Meyer (Fig. 6.1). With the exception of a few brief reaction shots, the rest of the scene plays out through a series of rapidly edited shots, none of which can quite contain Egan's anger (Fig. 6.2), but which work together to suggest the surprising spontaneity of his rage through the responsive camerawork.

Fig. 6.1 The frame of the much-repeated medium shot of a stagnant Selina Meyer is broken by Dan Egan's gesticulating arm

Fig. 6.2 The responsive camera struggles to contain Egan's outburst

A huge amount of energy is contained in Egan's outburst and reflected in the unsettled camerawork and kinetic editing which—in this sequence alone—moves between twenty-two shots taken from nine different camera positions in the space of 48 seconds. The editing is uneven and the changing pace of the scene is mirrored by the speed of the cutting, with the stagnant, repetitive shots of Meyer lasting longer than the constantly repositioning and reframing shots of Egan. Nevertheless, the average shot length of just over two seconds is miniscule by documentary standards. There is, then, a potential tension evident within the aesthetics of the image between the responsive, documentary-like style and the rapid editing between numerous camera positions.

However, I wish to suggest that rather than viewing these aspects as being simply anti-documentary, we can instead see them as integral aspects of contemporary mockumentary style. John Thornton Caldwell has argued that certain types of television can be described as performing a 'masquerade' whereby they 'promote themselves by playing off or parodying cinematic styles' (1995: 90–1) and 'revel in marshaling and displaying aesthetic systems' (ibid.: 92) through the excessive emulation of style. This is what is taking place within the television iteration of the mockumentary. *Veep*, for example, does not reflect a strict adoption of observational documentary conventions, which *does* feature imperfect camera movements, but tends to prefer lengthy shots from a single camera position so as to decrease the potential for interference by the camera

crew. Instead, the hybrid aesthetic removes the impracticalities associated with replicating the documentary image and performs an excessive masquerade of documentary.

Restricting the action to a single camera constantly reframing, for example, would require perfect performances and—counter-intuitively—a highly choreographed performance of spontaneity and authenticity. Instead the observational documentary style is distilled into a stylised version of documentary in which the over-exuberant editing becomes another way of conveying the kinesis of observational documentary camerawork. Thus, it is not the case that the camerawork is documentary-like whilst the editing follows dramatic editing conventions. Instead, the frantic editing is reflective of the frantic camera. Together they convey a similar sense of immediacy, spontaneity, responsiveness and authenticity, and encourage a similar mode of 'documentary experience' as do more precise imitations of documentary style. This combination can be seen throughout the texts discussed in this book, from *A Hard Day's Night* (Chap. 2) to *The Thick of It* (Chap. 5). As Ben Walters argues in relation to *The Office* (2001–2003), '[w]ithout the comforting distance provided by the "fourth wall", our implication in a given situation is of a much higher order' (2005: 68). The audience is given the sense that they are watching comic events unfold in the world in front of the responsive and intuitive 'documentary' camera, not that they are being performed *for* the (sitcom) camera. This is achieved through a stylised aesthetic which has become a particular hallmark of mockumentary comedy.

The comic impetus of the sequence is communicated through this stylistic combination. There are very few overt jokes. Instead, it is the momentum of the sequence, the sense of things spinning out of control, which is inherently comic. Meyer's inertia is a condition of her attempts to be ambiguous. She does have a view, but her inability to move forward comes from her failure to choose an adequately ambiguous position. Ironically, her indecision does lead to the creation of an ambiguous position, just not a media-friendly one. Her inertia is communicated through the repetition of the same camera position and through the hybrid style. Similarly, Egan's outburst is reflected in the more disjointed camerawork that captures it. Across the whole sequence, however, there is an overriding sense of the mockumentary's frenetic camerawork and editing working together to create a giddily comic sense of the characters losing control of the situation.

This experience is extended through the mockumentary image's engagement with diegetic and non-diegetic space. In their analysis of *Arrested Development* (2003–), Timotheus Vermeulen and James Whitfield claim that one characteristic aspect of the modern sitcom is that it 'problematises the relationship between what conventions imply should be watched, and what may also be watched in order to understand another dimension of the text's humour' (2013: 108). They are speaking specifically of the mechanics of the 'pull back and reveal' sight gag, but the implication is that whereas traditionally we understand a film or television text to be guiding our comprehension of meaning through what is shown to us, much contemporary television comedy overturns this notion, implying an active space outside the camera's view that may—or may not—become significant as the fiction unfolds.

Of course, the suggestion that there is a world beyond what we are seeing is a fundamental aspect of any fictional film or television text, and a great deal of a text's success depends on a competent process of world-building (Perkins 2005). However, when it comes to the processes of production, things are somewhat different. Sets are built and locations chosen which construct the world as it is seen by the camera. The fictional world beyond that is only implied and does not exist in reality. In other words, the diegetic world does not equal the non-diegetic space of filming. The same is not usually true for documentary—particularly observational documentary—where the premise that the camera is positioned within *the* world underpins all claims to realism, truth, indexicality, and authenticity. This documentary world extends forever, with the attendant implication being that a documentary filmmaker could choose to point their camera anywhere, at any time, and that there are an infinite number of potential camera positions which exist as alternatives to those actually chosen. This is another area in which the responsiveness of the mockumentary camera plays a part as it suggests that on another day, with a different operator, the camera might be pointed in another direction—this is not so with most fictional drama, where camera positions are meticulously planned so as to communicate meaning efficiently. In observational documentary the assumption that the diegetic world equals the non-diegetic world is key and the mockumentary attempts to convey this relationship through its style.

Although Vermeulen and Whitfield do mention the documentary-like qualities of *Arrested Development* they do not tie their discussion of sitcom world-building back to the documentary. Nevertheless, what we can see in *Arrested Development*, *Veep*, *The Thick of It*, *Modern Family* and other

recent mockumentary sitcoms is a documentary-like engagement with a fictional world that is implied to be the same as the non-diegetic world of the documentary. Another quality of the image that defines contemporary mockumentary comedy, then, is the weight that the documentary style places on the *mise en scène* to suggest that there is a 'documentary' (rather than a fictionally diegetic) world that extends beyond the frame, and that there are also an infinite number of ways in which that world could be recorded.

The large number of camera positions in the sequence from *Veep* plays into this, suggesting that the space can be intersected in any number of different ways, whilst the whole remains coherent. For example, at the end of Egan's rant a brief shot reveals Gary Walsh (Tony Hale), Meyer's personal aide, looking on in shock from a space in the room which so far in this scene has remained off-camera. The sudden revelation that Walsh has been in the room all along is an example of the 'pull back and reveal' gag which Vermeulen and Whitfield argue is emblematic of signalling the world beyond the frame. We had not, up until this point, known that Walsh was even present, but the shot of him reacting to Egan's diatribe adds a moment of comic surprise because it destabilises our understanding of the space. Walsh hasn't just entered the scene, he has been there all along, just not visible to us. From this point on, Walsh plays a leading role in the sequence, offering comic interjections as Egan backtracks and apologises for his outburst.

Despite its documentary credentials, the mockumentary aesthetic remains hybrid in nature and there is no sense that we would mistake *Veep* for a real documentary. However, even in its fragmentary form, mockumentary style is tied to a comic and reflexive commentary on the documentary project which is also inherently tied to questions of authenticity. This is crystallised in the second half of the scene under discussion. Egan is fired by Meyer after his rant, and attempts to backtrack, declaring, 'I love abortion. I'm an abortionado. But I would go pro-life in a foetal fucking heartbeat if it meant winning!' Egan's clarity on how to present a clear message clouds his moral judgement on the issue and Meyer calls him out on it. 'You're suggesting that you would like me to be a hypocrite like Maddox?' she asks, implying that the reason why there is difficulty in expressing a clear view is that she can't simply compromise her beliefs and her authenticity in order to provide a popular statement.

That Meyer's response cannot be a simple statement of her actual views for fear of losing votes is taken as a given, and instead she finds herself and

her team 'trying to figure out how I think about this issue'. In doing so, authenticity slips away to be replaced by ambiguity. Her book (ghost written by Egan) is no help in resolving the matter, for although it contains a short section on abortion, Meyer declares it to be 'pastel-coloured shit' and it is, indeed, highly ambiguous, Maddox-level gobbledygook: 'Freedom is what this nation is built on […] and freedom means the freedom to choose how to use that freedom to protect the freedom of others.'

In the end, Meyer and her team are unable to satisfactorily choose a position. In her live appearance on *Good Morning America* (1975–) that concludes the episode she is left reaffirming a slightly amended, but no less baffling, version of the paragraph from her book, that also compromises her position on the use of the phrase 'as a woman'. 'I believe that life is precious', she begins, 'and so are the hard-won freedoms that women throughout America enjoy today.' After a brief pause she utters a hesitant, 'Uh', before continuing by noting that, 'as a woman myself, I know that freedom means the freedom to choose…', the brief hesitation signalling that Meyer is so paralysed by the requirements of self-presentation that she can't even declare her gender. The episode ends with Meyer admitting that 'I said nothing. A big, fat, morbidly obese nothing', though McLintock notes that at least her publisher will be happy that she mentioned the book.

The entire farce results in Meyer taking a non-position that neither furthers, nor harms, her election prospect, but which continues to portray her as lacking substance. Her criticisms of her own book and of Maddox's statement, which she ultimately replicates, emphasise the hypocrisy required merely to get by in the world of contemporary politics. However, in one of the episode's cleverest ironies Meyer is presented with polling data that shows that the majority of Americans asked about the issue simply returned an 'I don't know' verdict. Clearly the politician cannot go on live television and be seen not to have a view, or else they risk embodying weak uncertainty. But it does suggest that in a situation where few people have a clear view, *not* forwarding a clear policy might turn out to be the most effective strategy.

Meyer's non-committal response provides the narrative reset that the sitcom has historically been theorised as possessing (Curtis 1982; Grote 1983; Marc 1989). However, in a stylistic flourish typical of the mockumentary sitcom, this return to narrative status quo is also a return to stylistic status quo. The camera-work and editing patterns become increasingly unsettled as the episode progresses and as the stakes—and the comic

impetus—increase. However, once Meyer has appeared on television and the crisis moment is over, the style returns to something more settled. We see Meyer, Brookheimer and McLintock watching television as the episode's credits roll up one half of the screen. As they debrief and assess Meyer's performance, the rapid editing continues, but the image intercuts between a small number of camera positions, each of which displays a relatively stable image. Although the average shot length is still short—around three seconds—this is a much more relaxed pace than at the episode's climax, and the settled nature of the individual shots returns a sense of calm to proceedings as (relative) order returns.

Veep offers a pessimistic view of a contemporary politics filled with ambiguity and emptiness. More than this, in its ambivalent mockumentary style it also offers an examination of the documentary form's ability to interrogate political authenticity. In *Veep* we are given a documentary-like look behind the scenes of political decision making, but find nothing there. The process of developing an ambiguous stance towards all controversial topics means that any authentic core beliefs a politician may hold are obfuscated to such an extent that it doesn't matter whether or not they actually believe anything at all. The obliteration of the straight documentary form within contemporary mockumentary style acts as a commentary on the failure of the documentary project to gain any satisfactory backstage access to the unguarded politician. We know that it is unlikely that a genuine documentary would be given unfettered access to the intricacies of political image making as it would undermine the claims of authenticity so produced. As a result, it is through a corrupted documentary-style image that we *are* given access to such machinations. However, the implication is that there is nothing to see. The search for the authentic politician is doubly flawed: there are no means through which the authentic, private politician can be captured without turning to fictionalisation and hybridisation, and there may not be an authentic private self to begin with.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising given this view of contemporary politics that in recent years an alternative, troubling, politics of populism has reared its head. The style of so-called straight-talking, 'tell it like it is', anti-politically-correct politics enacted by figures such as Donald Trump in the USA and Nigel Farage in the UK appears to have gained traction in part because it cuts through the politics of ambiguity. With his reality television heritage, Trump is the most performative of politicians and it is clear that the frames of reference necessary to comprehend the unfolding saga that is the Trump presidency are grounded in the world of reality television hybridity—and the

questions of successful and entertaining television performance—as much as they are from an understanding of political science and factual media forms.

What the politics of ambiguity and the focus on authenticity deny, alongside clarity of vision, is the opportunity for charisma. Richard Dyer argues that 'charismatic appeal is effective especially when the social order is uncertain, unstable and ambiguous and when the charismatic figure or group offers a value, order or stability to counterpoint this' (Dyer 1998: 31). This certainly seems to be true of figures like Trump and Farage who, in positioning themselves as politicians 'let off the leash' can appear charismatic by virtue of the fact that they are not constantly forced to keep themselves in check. In short, they appear to many to be authentic.

Of course, the mockumentary also has much to say about this extreme form of politicking. In *Veep*, Meyer accidentally spearheads her own populist movement when an autocue failure forces her to improvise around a half-remembered immigration policy. The benign and ambiguous mantra 'reform, reaffirm and renew' becomes the more confrontational 'reform, reaffirm and repel', with the latter stance playing well with the audience, perhaps because it actually forwards a clear—if problematic—policy. Elsewhere in the political mockumentary oeuvre, *Bob Roberts* (1992) and *Man with a Plan* (1996) explore the dramatic and comic potential, respectively, of a 'no-style' approach to campaigning. Roberts (Tim Robbins) is a right-wing, openly racist country singer whose provocative (and popular) songs include calls to lynch drug addicts. Conversely, in *Man with A Plan* Fred Tuttle, a destitute Vermont dairy farmer who plays a version of himself, runs for congress in order to pay off his debts, arguing that it is the only job in America where you need 'no experience, no résumé and no references'.

In both cases—and like Trump—their explicitness gains them support and makes them untouchable. Roberts wins his election and Tuttle beats the incumbent by a single vote. Thus, in both the mockumentary and the world of contemporary politics, the no-style campaign sees a return to the politics of implied authenticity, where potential politicians achieve success by simply saying what they think, no matter how controversial or problematic (or contrived) their views might be. It is instructive, and ironic, in this respect that following his appearance in *Man with A Plan*, Fred Tuttle won a genuine congressional race during the 1998 US election, despite openly voting for his opponent. Professed reluctance, it seems, is a surefire vote-winner.

The Political Mockumentary in a World of 'Fake News'

To return to where this chapter started, it is in this context that Alison Jackson's fake photographs of Trump also find their focus, because her images literalise and visualise the things already implicit in Trump's own statements, and I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief note on the position of the mockumentary within the contemporary political landscape. This landscape, in which we see a reality-television president in the White House decrying any media that disagrees with him as 'fake news', offers a legitimate challenge to the global understanding of media forms and opens up pertinent questions about the distinctions between fact and fiction and the real and the fake. The mockumentary has historically occupied a position which interrogates this porous boundary, poking at it and testing it in the name of comedy and reflexive commentary. This must continue in the future in order to keep the analysis of hybridity a mainstream project.

However, certain problems are also made visible by the contemporary debate around fake news. Throughout this book I have argued that mockumentaries in general—but comedies in particular—articulate their fictionality in some way. The same is true of parody news websites, such as The Onion, which some commentators incorrectly identify as distributing fake news. In comparison, genuine fake news, where misleading accounts are circulated (particularly by Russian agitators) in an attempt to spread disinformation and destabilise political systems, is especially insidious because it makes no attempt to expose itself as a fiction. The critical responses to the publication of Jackson's photograph of fake-Trump and the KKK are engaged in this wider political debate and suggest that we shouldn't assume the media sophistication of all potential audiences when it comes to making distinctions between real and fake. Returning to observations made at the start of both this chapter and, indeed, this book as a whole, Steven Poole argues that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were replete with fictional literature presented as fact, through the 'manufactured authenticity' (2013: 26) of the letter or the diary form. Now, however, 'heaven help you if you try to sell fact-based fiction as fact […] It seems we can no longer tolerate the playful ambiguity of the eighteenth century' (ibid.).

How the mockumentary will respond to the Trump presidency, with the potentially serious implications that it brings, remains to be seen. But it will have to navigate a complex landscape of hybrid media forms which are at

increasing risk of being censored and censured as 'fake news'. There is also the question of how satirical comedy engages with a political system which is more ridiculous than could be contained within its system of verisimilitude. Trump's unlikely and unexpected victory sits in tandem with the failure of Hilary Clinton's campaign, and this poses particular questions for the progressiveness of an American society which appears to prefer all of Trump's many, perhaps even criminal, flaws over a female leader. That *Veep* is inherently tied to Clinton's political trajectory due to its focus on a flawed and ultimately unsuccessful campaign run by a female politician also poses problems, as its pessimistic view of Meyer was, until recently, offset by the fact that at least in the real world a woman was highly likely to become president. It is telling that on the day of writing this paragraph the producers of *Veep* have announced that the show will end in 2018 after its seventh season, and it is difficult to see this decision as being entirely unrelated to Clinton's failure. As Yohana Desta, writing in *Vanity Fair* suggests,

> *Veep* rose to comic greatness during a relatively sane period in American history—but it will come to an end during the Donald Trump presidency, an era that makes the show's cast of clowns look like political geniuses. There was a certain joy about watching the series during the Barack Obama years, a time when Americans weren't slapped with national crises on a daily basis—and didn't face a president casually tweeting typo-filled messages about nuclear war and 'fake' news. Watching *Veep* now comes with the odious reminder that life truly is stranger than fiction, a fact that makes all of Selina Meyer's missteps sting that much more. (2017)

It remains to be seen how satire persists in the face of a political system which is above (or below?) such critique, and which is actively seeking to close down debate by attacking factual media's relationship with the truth. This applies to the mockumentary form more than many others, given that its hybrid nature deliberately plays with precisely the kinds of ruptures that are facing attack, as Trump's alleged threats to sue Alison Jackson make concrete.

However, one shouldn't be too pessimistic, and in the short concluding chapter that follows I offer a brief examination of some alternative forms of mockumentary comedy that have begun to proliferate in the digital realm. They offer a hopeful future for mockumentary comedy, and continue to offer incisive political and critical commentary through the combination of sophisticated digital tools and comic frameworks. It is hoped that through such outlets the vital job of holding those in power to account through comedy will continue to flourish.

Notes

1. The term 'alternative facts' came to prominence in January 2017 when Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway attempted to defend White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's deliberately and demonstrably false statements about the size of the crowds at Trump's inauguration. Conway suggested that Spicer was simply presenting 'alternative facts'.
2. The notion of 'post-truth' also plays into a wider postmodernist discourse around the nature of truth and reality. It is not my intention to explore this in any significant detail here, but it is worth flagging up in particular the arguments concerning simulacra outlined by Jean Baudrillard (1994), as well as his argument about the mediation of images of war affecting the understanding and meaning we are to draw from them in his three-part article 'The Gulf War: Is It Really Taking Place?' ([1991] 2008).
3. This gag recalls the sequence in *What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A.* where the autograph collector misidentifies Paul McCartney (see Chap. 2). The signature offers an interesting parallel with the documentary, given that it is the original, pre-audio-visual guarantee of authenticity and/of identity. However, like the documentary, it can be easily fabricated and so is only a guarantee of authenticity if 'witnessed'.
4. The name T.J. Cavanaugh is strikingly similar to C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney), President Bartlett's (Martin Sheen) Press Secretary in *The West Wing* (1999–2006). It is possible that the T.J/C.J echo stems from external influences from the real world, notably Dee Dee Myers who was a spokesperson for Michael Dukakis during his 1988 presidential campaign (when *Tanner '88* was made) and was Bill Clinton's first Press Secretary. The phonetic similarity of all three names seems like a nod to this, as does the surname of Selena Meyer, Julia Louis-Dreyfus's character in *Veep*.
5. Altman and Trudeau revived Tanner and his team in 2004 for a four-part television series called *Tanner on Tanner* which retains the mockumentary look and follows Alex as she attempts to make a documentary film about her father's 1988 campaign. In another added twist, in March 2018 Cynthia Nixon, who plays Alex in both *Tanner* projects, announced that she was going to run as a candidate for governor of New York.
6. This cross-pollination of talent between the British and American iterations also suggests a political convergence between the USA and UK.

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CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: Digital Mockumentary

Throughout this book I have been concerned with demonstrating the value of examining mockumentary comedy in greater detail than has so far been the case. To do so opens up a wealth of new ways in which to think about the reflexivity of the mockumentary form, and of how it functions at an aesthetic level across its history. By relaxing some of the more stringent definitions of what can be considered a mockumentary, we also make visible the developments that have come to characterise the modern mockumentary form. These aspects include, but are not limited to: the removal of an explicit diegetic film crew; the addition of rapid editing patterns that derive from fiction filmmaking processes but mirror the frantic feeling of observation documentary camerawork; and the manipulation and recontextualisation of genuine news footage. Each of these aspects speaks to the mockumentary's continuing trajectory away from a direct stylistic engagement with the straight documentary and has become a recognisable formal characteristic in its own right.

In this short concluding chapter, I wish to suggest that another way in which we can think about this trajectory is in relation to Raymond Williams's influential treatise on dominant, residual and emergent cultural elements (1977). In this work, Williams argues that focusing on dominant cultural elements is insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of any particular historical moment. Instead, he argues that it is always necessary 'to recognize the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance'

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(ibid.: 121). These interrelating elements he characterises as being 'dominant', 'residual' and 'emergent'. The dominant aspects are those that have become the hegemonic norm. Residual cultural elements have 'been effectively formed in the past', but are 'still active in the cultural process […] as an effective element of the present' (122). Emergent tendencies are new aspects that are not yet established, but play a part in the complexities of contemporary society.

We can read these elements in two separate ways in relation to the mockumentary. First, across the broad sweep of mockumentary history we can see dominant, residual and emergent tendencies in the kinds of mockumentary texts which appear at particular points in time. As well as enabling us to conceptualise the mockumentary's prior formal history, this framework also speaks towards a number of recent digital mockumentary forms which, it seems to me, offer a mixture of all three of Williams's characteristics. The same framework can also be used to think about the mockumentary's relationship with documentary, which I have been arguing throughout this book is increasingly one of residuality.

Beginning with the last of these points, we can think of aspects of documentary style *within the mockumentary form* as aligning with some of Williams's characteristics. Most obviously, the use of hand-held cameras remains *the* dominant aspect of documentary style that is replicated in the contemporary mockumentary and has driven the form since its inception. On the other hand, the explicit visibility of a camera crew is a residual documentary characteristic. As I suggested in the discussion of *Veep* (2012–) in Chap. 6, the camera style implies the presence of a crew and this implied presence informs our reading, but the explicit acknowledgement that a crew is present is no longer a requirement of the mockumentary form (though it does sometimes still occur). The residue of documentary's diegetic camera crew can be found in the stylistic implication. On the other hand, the development of a particularly kinetic editing system can be seen as an emergent mockumentary characteristic, though one that could be argued to have become another dominant aspect over the past decade.

Mockumentary comedy as it exists today, exhibits a number of defining characteristics which do not rely on a stringent replication of documentary conventions, and so in general the documentary itself has become a residual aspect of the mockumentary form. This visual style, evident in programmes such as *The Thick of It* (2005–2012), *The Trip*

(2010–), *Arrested Development* (2003–), *Modern Family* (2009–), *W1A* (2014–2017) and *Kath and Kim* (2002–2007), does not contain an explicit diegetic camera crew and would therefore be discounted from most previous discussions of the mockumentary form. However, the hybrid style of these programmes is not problematic to viewers, and the number of examples continues to grow. They have become mainstream and recognisable as mockumentaries in and of themselves because our familiarity with previous examples of the form, particularly *The Office* (2001–2003), *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) and Christopher Guest's work in general, mean that we understand what is going on in these texts without having to be explicitly told.

This speaks to the notion that we can view the mockumentary itself as having residual, emergent and dominant modes which co-exist in tension with one another, but which can be linked to general historical tendencies. Thus the 1980s was a period in which mockumentary comedy was signalled through an oscillation between a close, though not exact, appropriation of documentary style in competition with its comic tonal register. This remains a residual mode of expression. However, the contemporary mockumentary sitcoms that dominate popular experience today are far less concerned with replicating documentary style in detail.

Contemporary mockumentaries have a certain quality that defines them beyond the imitation of a specific formal documentary style. *The Trip*, for example, does not conform visually to strict definitions of the mockumentary. However, it *feels* like a mockumentary because of the immediacy of the camerawork, the urgency in the image that suggests that 'this is happening right now and can only be captured on film at this very moment', and the mode of performance. In other words, the dominant mode of mockumentary is one where the documentary characteristics are increasingly residual.

Seen in this way, the loosening of the definitions of what constitutes a mockumentary enables us to look at some alternative spaces where emergent acts of mockumentary creation seem to be taking place which up to now might not otherwise have been visible. This is particularly the case in the digital realm which we can also think about in terms of fostering emergent mockumentary forms. Spencer Schaffner argues that this has occurred through the development of ambitious 'multigeneric web mockumentary projects' which 'feature traditional forms of mockumentary video embedded in an array of other texts, feeds, and online genres' (2012: 204). In

other words, the mockumentary content is residual in nature, but its formal characteristics are emergent, as a result of having being subject to a process of digital 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin 1999). This 'assemblage' of media, Schaffner argues, 'is becoming the face of mockumentary online' (ibid.: 201).

A key emergent component of this mockumentary work stems from social networks, file-sharing sites and video 'tube' channels which enable non-professional users to create satirical content and disseminate it widely outside of the traditional distribution channels of television, radio, film and print media. This has democratised the production of satire, and the rise of mimetic media (internet memes) over the last decade has accelerated and normalised this process.

Digital satire—including memes—often has a fundamentally mockumentary character. Memes are 'aggregate texts' (Ryan M. Milner 2016: 2)—images, audio files and videos—that are 'created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives' as part of a 'vast cultural tapestry' (ibid.: 1, 2). I have argued that one key strand of mockumentary comedy is the reworking, recontextualising, re-editing and even the faking of news footage for a comedic or satirical purpose (as in Alison Jackson's work). This reworking of news footage also underpins many internet memes, an established mockumentary form packaged as part of an emergent process.

Particularly intricate are the offerings of YouTube members rx2008, cassetteboy and Bad Lip Reading. rx2008 rapidly cuts political footage to ironically appropriate pop songs so that, for example, Tony Blair appears to 'sing' the lyrics to The Clash song 'Should I Stay or Should I Go'. Cassetteboy takes the tunes from well-known rap songs and edits news footage to them, so that the politicians provide alternative lyrics. For example, in 'Trump', the original lyrics to OutKast's 'Miss Jackson'—'I'm sorry, Ms. Jackson, I am for real'—are transformed through Trump's voice into, 'I'm sorry, Ms Clinton, this is for real'. The last of these three, Bad Lip Reading, takes a more straightforward approach by removing the audio from news material and replacing it with an alternative soundtrack of spoken-word impressions based on what the people appear to be saying if you only read their lips.

Milner argues that 'it's hard to imagine a major pop cultural or political moment that doesn't inspire its own constellation of mediated remix, play, and commentary' (2016: 1). Perhaps inevitably, Donald Trump has proved to be a particular rich target. Images of him looking directly at the sun—without safety glasses—during the solar eclipse of August 2017 were

widely circulated and ridiculed. His vacant demeanour has also come under repeated satirical scrutiny, with a common practice being for footage of a particularly inept action—failing to see his waiting limousine, say, or inviting the press to witness the signing of an executive order which he then forgets to sign—to be combined with the theme music from a television comedy series, usually those from HBO mockumentary comedies *Veep* or *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–).

Such practices demonstrate the ability of the amateur to emulate that which had previously only been possible for the professional satirist, recasting residual forms as emergent (perhaps even dominant) cultural practices. Key to this is the role of the internet and social media in providing an audience for amateur satire. Previously, even if the amateur had had the tools to make such work, media gatekeepers would have made it almost impossible to distribute widely. Although still not reaching the wide audience of a mainstream television broadcast, social networks encourage sharing and dissemination, so the home-made satire directly reaches a much wider audience than it once would have.

As an example, the most recently broadcast episode of the BBC's popular satirical panel show *Have I Got News for You* (1990–) at the time of writing was watched by 4.88 million viewers. In contrast, the satirical Twitter feed @TrumpDraws—which sends up Trump's obsession with signing executive orders by transforming news footage into a series of animated.gif files where the legal wording and presidential signature are replaced by rudimentary drawings and child-like writing—has around 439,000 followers, only a tenth of *HIGNFY*'s audience. Nevertheless this is an audience that is still thousands of times greater than would have been possible only a decade ago. An obvious point of comparison is the letters sent in by viewers joining in with *Panorama*'s (1953–) 'Spaghetti Harvest' which I discussed at the start of this book. In contrast with the handful of production personnel who would have seen these correspondences in private, similar participatory—but public—behaviours now have the potential to be seen by millions, including those who produce the programmes with which we are engaging. These examples only gesture towards these emergent forms of digital mockumentary practices and it will be interesting to see how they develop in the future, especially given a political climate in the USA which is making active and aggressive attacks on press freedom by labelling all non-sympathetic news outlets as fake news.

I conclude this short discussion with one final example which both highlights current digital processes, but also returns us full circle to where

this book began. The Twitter account @louistherouxbot uses a random text generator to compile hypothetical documentary situations in which we might find the performative documentary filmmaker Louis Theroux. Theroux is a filmmaker renowned for his journalistic investigations of weird, unusual and controversial subject matter and for his characteristic self-performance in his own films. @louistherouxbot's tweets always take the form of introductory documentary narration and the most recent entry at the time of writing is, 'I'm in Wisconsin to meet Ophelia, a former loan shark turned straight edge vampire who believes Obama can control the weather' (@louistherouxbot 2017b). On 24 October 2017, @louistherouxbot generated the following tweet: 'I'm in Amsterdam to meet Hannah, a former IT expert turned cybergoth who believes Hull is a portal to Hell' (2017a). The tweet gained more attention than usual when Theroux himself shared the tweet through his own Twitter feed, adding that, '[i]f this gets enough retweets I'll record it. Using my real voice' (@louistheroux 2017a). This he eventually did, posting a recording of his introduction to a documentary that did not actually exist (@louistheroux 2017b).

Although only a few seconds long, the humour of this mockumentary extract depends on the knowledge that it is fake and the identifiable participation of the well-known documentary filmmaker. Like Richard Dimbleby's commentary on the 'Swiss Spaghetti Harvest' hoax with which I began this book, Theroux's voice carries with it the weight of authority, even though we are well aware that what we are seeing is a joke. In doing so, this short example of a digital mockumentary speaks towards some of the changes and continuities that I have addressed throughout this book. The sense of documentary authority implied by the use of a well-known figure in documentary remains a consideration, though there is no intention to fool. Instead the playful nod towards its own fabrication also gestures towards the wider shifts in documentary filmmaking processes that have occurred over the past sixty years. These have opened up a space for performative filmmakers like Theroux, Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore and have also resulted in a more informed audience who are aware of the ways in which straight documentaries are shaped, and how this in turn affects their view of the world. It also speaks to the acceptance of the mockumentary as a mainstream form that there is no concern that what we are witnessing will be mistaken for the 'real thing'. Finally, in being the direct response to a Twitter account, presumably run by an ordinary member of the public, we see a clear dialogue between professionals

and non-professionals in action. In perhaps the biggest contrast to the *Panorama* segment, the audience isn't just in on the joke, but is a key part of its production.

Next Steps

Although instructive in thinking about digital media, this discussion of residual, dominant and emergent cultural aspects also makes it clear that there are numerous aspects of mockumentary comedy that have still not been fully explored. A central project of this book has been the exploration of performance and comedy in the mockumentary. Nevertheless, there is still work to do in this area, particularly in terms of examining the process of acting closely. It could be argued that another dominant aspect of the contemporary mockumentary form is the development of a particular mode of mockumentary performance which has come to characterise the form in recent years as much as its visual style. Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon playing themselves in *The Trip* is one such example, particularly the way in which we view these individual performances as just one point in a larger web of performances that informs the way we view the series. Coogan's performance of himself in *The Trip*, for example, plays in particular on his role as Alan Partridge, his portrayal of himself in *A Cock and Bull Story* (2005) and his public persona as a tabloid favourite. That Coogan can be seen as a 'mockumentary performer' is upheld by his in-character appearances as Partridge outside of a fictional setting at book signings, on DVD audio commentaries and as the narrator of talking books. Indeed, the image section of Partridge's (auto?)biography (Partridge et al. 2011) contains what appear to be genuine photographs of Coogan as a boy, the image's credit—'courtesy of author'—providing the tantalising suggestion that genuine photos of Coogan's own childhood might be doubling as a record of Partridge's youth, blurring the distinction between character and actor further.

Many mockumentaries create a sense of pleasure from such layering of performances, and from the familiarity of repetition. We enjoy watching Coogan play himself in a self-aware fashion, addressing his previous roles and deconstructing his own public image, and the ferocity of Peter Capaldi's Malcolm Tucker is a central component of *The Thick of It*'s success. There is more work to do here, though Karen Lury (1995), and Gary Cassidy and Simone Knox's 'What Actors Do' blog series (2015–) offer some tantalising avenues of investigation in this regard.

There is also an emerging discourse within film and television studies on the importance of texture, both visual and sonic, to the experience of audio-visual media. This work, most clearly apparent in Lucy Fife Donaldson's recent monograph *Texture in Film* (2014), is sure to play an important role in future discussions of mockumentary texts, particularly those that play with the ontological status of the archive.

Mockumentary comedies make us reconsider the original images from which they are drawn, and encourage us to think differently about how we see the world. And they make us laugh at the same time. *Spinal Tap* changes the way in which we watch *The Last Waltz* (1978) and other music documentaries made both before and after it, but this is a side effect of its parodic humour. *The Thick of It* makes us see the workings of politics differently by using humour to highlight the performative nature of those running our countries, and the ridiculousness of those aspects that might be lurking just out of our vision when we watch the evening news. Unlike the straight mockumentary, which trades in a sobering critique of the documentary form, mockumentary comedies provide a constant reminder that the reality can be, and frequently is, as strange and as amusing as fiction.

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