

DOCUMENTING THE DOCUMENTARY

Close Readings of
Documentary Film and Video

Edited by

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WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS Detroit

1998

Gender, Power, and a Cucumber

Satirizing Masculinity in *This Is Spinal Tap*

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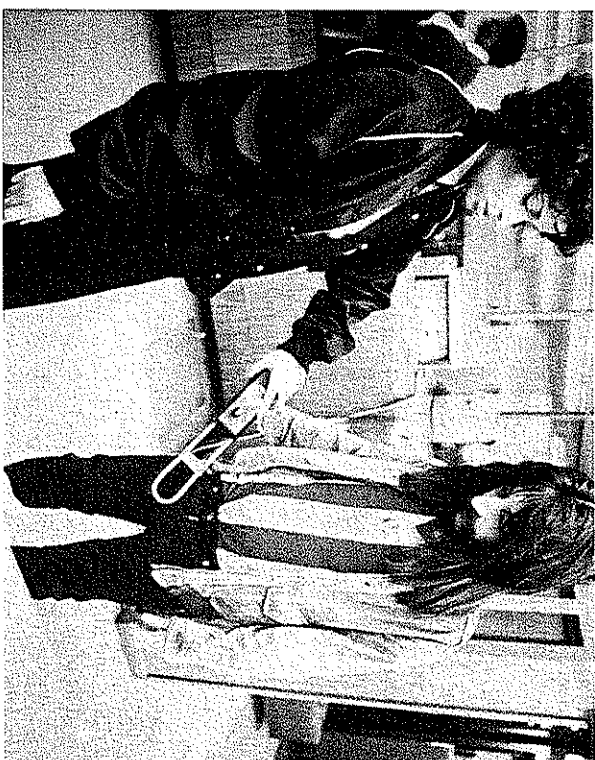
As a military term in the nineteenth century, "heavy metal" signified "large guns, carrying balls of a large size" (Walsler 1); today "heavy metal" refers to a kind of rock music practiced by bands such as Metallica, Black Sabbath, and Motley Crüe. The two meanings are not unrelated, as the satiric *This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

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

and erotically available. That it is two *women* who force Derek to publicly reveal his pretensions thus doubles the embarrassment.

The promotion of stereotypical gender roles is the province not merely of heavy metal, but of rock music generally. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie claim that rock music solidifies gender stereotypes, and that hard rock, or what they call "cock rock," is a "male form" (373). "Both in its presentation and in its use," they write, "rock has confirmed traditional definitions of what constitutes masculinity and femininity" (387). The music video has also been scrutinized for its gender implications (Kaplan, Lewis). Lisa Lewis argues that rock videos draw on ideologies of adolescence and masculinity, creating a "male preferred address" which supports "a social system of male privilege" (35). In this regard, heavy metal is not qualitatively different than mainstream rock music; it is simply more extreme.

Heavy metal has diverse critics, ranging from the religious right to Tipper Gore to rock critics on the progressive left. Yet even sympathetic commentators describe heavy metal as a discourse of power and masculinity that defines masculinity in traditional terms as the binary opposite of femininity



This Is Spinal Tap: The problem with cucumbers—Derek is forced to reveal his pretensions in public.

(Weinstein 102–6; Walser 108–36). The audience for heavy metal, as Decena Weinstein notes, “is more than just male; it is masculinist” (104). Recent developments in heavy metal culture include “lite” or “glam” metal (with bands such as Poison and Bon Jovi), forms which attract more female audiences. At the time of *This Is Spinal Tap*’s 1984 release, however, heavy metal culture was, when not overtly misogynist, unwelcoming to females, excluding women from the rank of equals, and emphasizing male bonding. Yet like Derek’s cucumber, heavy metal’s image of masculinity is a fabrication and an exaggeration. And like the security guards at the airport, *This Is Spinal Tap* displays the pretensions of this hypermasculinist discourse for all to see.

This Is Spinal Tap was director Rob Reiner’s first feature film, though previous experience included his role as “Meathead” on television’s *All in the Family*.¹ Spinal Tap, the band, consists of Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) on lead guitar, David St. Hubbins (Michael McKean) as lead vocalist, Derek Smalls (Shearer) on bass, Viv Savage (David Kauf) on keyboards, and Mick Shrimpton (R. S. Parnell) on drums. Reiner, Guest, McKean, and Shearer share the writing credits, and the latter three wrote and performed all the music. Guest had long been toying with the character of grinning lead guitarist Nigel, and in 1979, he, McKean, and Shearer appeared on a television show spoofing “Midnight Special,” with Reiner playing Wolfman Jack. Out of this experience grew Spinal Tap. Later, on the strength of a twenty-minute demonstration reel, Avco Embassy agreed to finance the feature film, which eventually cost \$2.2 million to produce.

This Is Spinal Tap played well in the large urban markets generally thought to be “sophisticated”—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto. Reiner notes that his previews of the film in a Dallas shopping mall proved less successful: “A small section of the audience laughed. The rest asked why we would make a serious documentary about a terrible band they had never heard of” (quoted in Hammett 20). But the film’s overall success resulted in Spinal Tap’s appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, commercial album sales, a music video, and a tour. The group even re-formed in 1992, with their new album, “Break Like the Wind.”

Clearly, an appreciation for *This Is Spinal Tap* depends on taking it not as a “serious documentary” about an obscure and untalented band, but as a *pseudodocumentary*, a fiction film which, like *Zelig* (1983) and *Bob Roberts* (1992), parodies the forms of documentary.² An appreciation of the acting, writing, and filmmaking—the art of the film—depends on our reflexive understanding of its parody and satire, as I discuss below. *This Is Spinal Tap* mimics standing of its parody and satire, as I discuss below. *This Is Spinal Tap* mimics rock documentaries such as *Woodstock* (1970), *Gimme Shelter* (1970), and *The Last Waltz* (1978). Reiner contracted documentary producer Karen Mur-phy to give the film a surface authenticity, and hired cinematographer Peter Smokler, who had worked on *Gimme Shelter*, as director of photography. *This Is Spinal Tap* was largely improvised during production; the group improvised

scenes around a loose outline, giving the film a stronger documentary feel than the tightly controlled films of mainstream Hollywood.

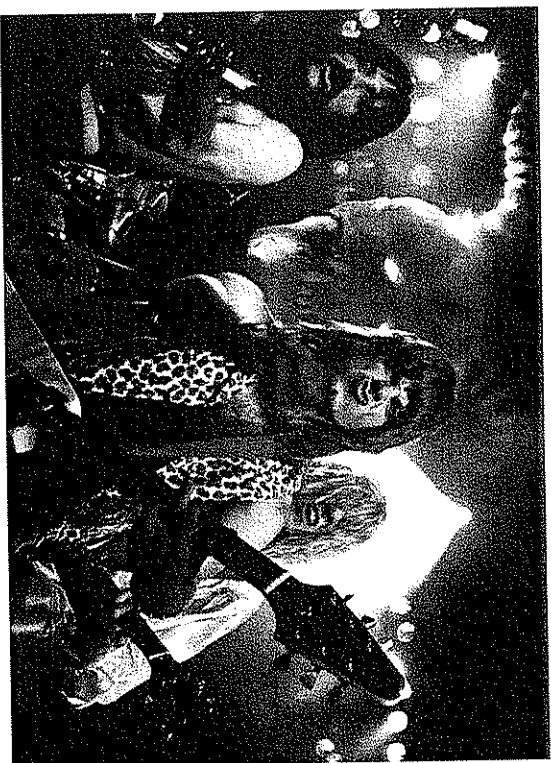
I have referred to *This Is Spinal Tap* as a *satire* of the heavy metal discourse on masculinity, and a *parody* of rock documentaries. The terms “satire” and “parody” are often used as synonyms, but have slightly different meanings. Both involve the imitation of and ironic commentary on another discourse. Yet satire implies ridicule of its target, while a parody need not devalue its object, but may range from an ethos of condemnation to one of homage and celebration (cf. Hutcheon 30–49).

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

Although *This Is Spinal Tap* parodies the rock documentary, it reserves its satire and ridicule for Spinal Tap and its hypermasculinity. Both parody and satire depend on the sophistication of the viewer, and on some familiarity with the satiric or parodic target. *This Is Spinal Tap* tempts us to approach it as a “serious” documentary, but introduces comic markers—typically ironic incongruities or exaggerations—to disrupt our “serious” viewing (Jenkins 40). Irony is essential to both parody and satire, and is the “main rhetorical mechanism” for expressing textual interpretations and evaluations (Hutcheon 31). Comedy presents ironies for the sake of laughter, as when various characters continually mangle the band’s name. The limousine driver meets Spinal Tap at the airport with a cardboard sign reading “Spinal Pap” and, later, Lt. Bill Hogstrat refers to the band as “Spinal Tap.” Satire typically has a more critical bent, often with a social or political point. The band’s stage antics and relationships with women, a point to which I shall return later, are satirical. In this way *This Is Spinal Tap* represents heavy metal music and culture, exaggerates it or highlights incongruities, and critiques it through satire.

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

Much of the visual humor of the film occurs during the tour and per-



This Is Spinal Tap: The concert performance is an expression of masculine virtuosity in heavy metal culture.

formances. Heavy metal, Walzer writes, “often stages fantasies of masculine virtuosity and control” (108), in which “spectacular gladiators compete to register and affect ideas of masculinity, sexuality, and gender relations” (111). *Spinal Tap*’s pathetic reality contrasts with these delusions of mastery and grandiosity. Coverage of the tour begins with an optimistic, energetic montage as *Spinal Tap* arrives in New York, with the requisite shots of the band members moving purposefully through the airport, roadies unloading equipment, excited fans wildly cheering in a packed concert hall, and the band itself in the film’s first concert footage. However, the tour soon leads *Spinal Tap* on a downward spiral of failure and humiliation. And though the concert performances are designed to convey grandeur, power, and virtuosic skill, various mishaps create an opposite sense. One of the film’s best visual gags occurs at “Shank Hall” in Milwaukee, where during the performance the band is supposed to emerge, in a choreographed “birth,” from three egglike pods.³ Unfortunately, Derek’s pod malfunctions and does not open, and while he tries to retain his composure, a roadie hacks at the pod with a hammer and then burns it with a blowtorch. Finally it opens and the relieved Derek bursts free, but at just the wrong moment—immediately after David and Nigel have returned to their pods for the end of the number. What is intended as a skilled display of choreographed movement turns into travesty and farce.

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

David’s partner, Jeanine Petitbone (June Chadwick), takes over as manager, but she is unable to reverse the band’s downward trend. In Seattle, their regular gig is canceled so they find themselves playing for the “monthly at-ease weekend” at Lindbergh Air Force Base, where the audience expects easy listening music. (Black Sabbath—then called “Earth”—once found itself in a similar predicament: a booking mistake found them at a party where the audience expected waltzes; Weinstein 32–33). At the base Lt. Bob Hogstrat

allows the band thirty minutes to set up so they can "get it over with." After transmissions from a control tower interfere with the guitars, Nigel decides he has had enough, walks off stage, and quits the band. Near the bottom of Spinal Tap's steady downward trajectory, the band appears at Themeland Amusement Park, where the billboard reads "Puppet Show and Spinal Tap." Jeanine tries to put an optimistic face on events, noting that at least they've got a large dressing room. David sarcastically replies, "Oh, we've got a bigger dressing room than the puppets!" In all of these cases, the satire foregrounds the incongruity between the music and its presentation, which are intended to signify extreme vitality and power, and the pathetic situations in which the band finds itself.

Heavy metal performance celebrates maleness specifically through sexual and virtuosic display. Performance in what Frith and McRobbie call "cock rock" "is an explicit, crude, and often aggressive expression of male sexuality" (374). For example, Van Halen lead singer David Lee Roth sometimes performed while wearing tight leather pants with the cloth around the buttocks cut out. On the cover of the band's first album, *Van Halen* (1978), Roth appears with a naked chest and a microphone jutting from his crotch. His running, jumping, and gymnastic moves on stage all were meant to signify physical prowess and sexual vitality. Such individualistic display is often allowed only to the lead singer and lead guitarist, although the drummer sometimes gets his solo as well.

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

Through Nigel, Spinal Tap's lead guitarist and the film's lead player,

the film most pointedly satirizes the hypermasculine theater of heavy metal performers—especially guitarists. On stage, Nigel's strutting gyrations, facial contortions, and tongue-wagging exaggerate what every wanna-be rocker recognizes as the conventions of heavy metal's "cult of the lead guitarist." The performances of Nigel and the band reduce sexual relations to animal drives and strutting sexual display. While the music keeps time to a throbbing, erotic rhythm, the lyrics to songs such as "Sex Farm" and "Big Bottom" ("I just can't leave her behind") equate sexuality with expressions of aggression and lust. Moreover, the stage show becomes a display of erotic gymnastics. Spandex was introduced to heavy metal around 1980. As Weinstein notes, "Pants made of this material allow greater freedom of movement on stage and better display of the athletic bodies of the performers, thereby promoting an image of vital power" (30). Moreover, for Spinal Tap, the skin-tight Spandex outfits feed their obsession with penis size (also echoed by Derek's airport incident). Nigel imagines that the band's impressive bodies and bulging genitalia cause "terror" in many of their fans. His guitar-playing epitomizes the band's sexual display; his instrument metaphorically becomes a giant phallus, as he holds it against his crotch and swings it toward the crowd, while grimacing and suggestively wagging his tongue. In short, the art this band practices is a none-too-subtle celebration of animal masculinity.

Heavy metal emphasizes the guitar solo as much as any subgenre of rock; nearly every heavy metal song features at least one such solo, and few other instruments are allowed solos. The guitar solo is a primary means through which the heavy metal performer expresses *virtuosity*; it is a forum for the display not only of musical skill and technical wizardry, but of a more diffuse masculine quality. As Walser writes, "Virtuosity—ultimately derived from the Latin root *vir* [man]—has always been concerned with demonstrating and enacting a particular kind of power and freedom that might be called 'potency'" (76). Thus Eddie Van Halen's extended guitar solo on "Van Halen" is called "Eruption," a metaphor for male ejaculation.

In *This Is Spinal Tap*, all displays of what the band considers virtuosity become ironic implications of its lack. Nigel has meager talents at best, as is clear from a dismal guitar solo during which, after the requisite riff of repeated high notes, he grates his tennis shoe and then a violin against the guitar strings, creating a deafening cacophony. During another solo, he is so overcome by the sublimity of his playing that he descends—in orgasmic bliss, it seems—to the stage floor, where a roadie tries to pick him up without disturbing his performance. (The mediocrity of Nigel's playing stands in contrast to the guitar skills of the best *actual* metal guitarists—e.g., Eddie Van Halen, Randy Rhoads—whose obvious technical skill belies the contention that just anyone could play heavy metal guitar.)

Nigel's pretensions and fastidious nature—both privileges of rock stardom—become one of the film's motifs. Spoiled fussiness is apparent at Vand-

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

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

Heavy metal's theater of hypermasculinity doesn't simply relate to men; it has implications for women as well. Weinstein notes that "Women are aliens in the heavy metal subculture because of their otherness," and that heavy metal culture is "an enormous male bonding group" (135). Waisner describes what he calls the "exscription," or exclusion, of women from heavy metal culture, and its misogyny. Heavy metal, he writes, is "a world of action, excess, transgression . . . one in which men are the only actors, and in which male bonding among members of the 'hero team' is the only important social relationship" (114-15). Women are also seen as a threat because their attractiveness "threatens to disrupt both male self-control and the collective strength of male bonding" (Waisner 118). This in part accounts for the misogynistic

lyrics of bands such as W.A.S.P., Guns N' Roses, and Motley Crüe, and the prevalence of the *femme fatale* figure in the songs of Dokken and Whitesnake, for example.

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

Jeanine is controlling and a bit dotty, charting the band's travel plans according to horoscopes. Her hold on David, and through him her influence on the band, is significant. David needs the "direction" she gives, saying that she "sorted out his life for him." On the telephone before she arrives, she tells David she can determine by his voice that he's been eating too much sugar. Jeanine becomes a kind of nuclear threat to the male culture of *This Is Spinal Tap*. She monopolizes and influences David, and associates little with other band members. In the band's bus, David and Jeanine sit in front, and Jeanine refuses David's mumbling requests for permission to join the other band members at the rear. During an interview David says that Jeanine influences the band's music through the criticisms she reveals only to David: "She gives me the brutally frank version and I sort of tart it up for [the rest of the band]." She sometimes whispers into David's ear, and he obediently acts. Despite David's claim that Jeanine and Nigel love each other (though admittedly their "communication is blocked"), their mutual antipathy is obvious in their competition for David's attentions. During a recording session, Nigel loudly criticizes David's playing, saying that Jeanine has been distracting him. The real issue is that Jeanine violates the masculine code of the band, because she usurps the power usually reserved for men.

As Jeanine assumes greater control, both Nigel and Ian (the manager) become increasingly alienated. During a restaurant meeting, Jeanine suggests that their latest album has been mixed poorly, but her references to "Dobby" (rather than "Dolby") give Nigel cause to make fun of her. She then unveils her ideas for a new production design for the band, featuring masks for the

three band leaders that not-too-subtly reveal her sympathies. While Nigel is to wear a Capricorn mask that resembles a devilish goat, and Derek a scorpion-face derived from Scorpio, David's Leo mask would be a handsome lion. Nigel quickly rejects Jeanine's plans, and hastily draws the Stonehenge sketch on a napkin, which becomes the ill-fated idea for their newest prop.

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

Neither the band members nor their manager accept women as equals; for them women are either complacent sex kittens or monstrous manipulators. The band's sexism is "retarded," or juvenile, because it is completely unconscious. The album cover for their release, *Smell the Glove*, alludes to the ties between heavy metal and sadomasochism, and features a greased, naked woman on all fours, wearing a dog collar and leash, supine before a black glove, pushed to her face. When Bobbi Fleckman denounces the cover to Ian, he tells her she "should have seen the cover they wanted to do. It wasn't a glove, believe me." When the band is told that the album will not be released due to its sexist cover, Nigel naively asks, "What's wrong with being sexy?"

Ian is a well-drawn character, and an important means by which the film satirizes a masculinity that can barely control aggression. Ian percolates with the threat of both verbal and physical violence (he carries the phallic cricket bat with him wherever he goes). Weinstein notes that heavy metal culture is homophobic, lending toward "an attitude of extreme intolerance toward male homosexuality" (106). Although this aspect of heavy metal culture is mostly ignored in *This Is Spinal Tap*, it is apparent in the insults Ian hurls at other adult men, featuring derogatory terms for homosexuals. Sir Dennis Eaton-Hogg (Patrick MacNee) is the over-stuffed president of Polymer Records (the pun on "Polydor" denoting the plastic or ersatz nature of his enterprise). When Sir Dennis cancels plans for the album cover, Ian covers the telephone mouthpiece and mutters, "fucking old poofter." Later Ian abuses a thickly lensed hotel clerk, calling him a "twisted old fruit."⁴

Although *This Is Spinal Tap* satirizes the hypermasculine theater of Spinal Tap and heavy metal, the film transcends mean-spirited ridicule. Thomas

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

The North American tour temporarily sends the band on a downward trend of canceled gigs and interpersonal conflict. This move toward defeat and disintegration, characteristic of ironic narrative structure, culminates at the "End of Tour Party" in Los Angeles. The scene begins with a reverse zoom from two old women lying on lawn chairs by the pool, an image expressing the opposite of energy and power, and suggesting that the band has lost its adolescent male audience. Nigel and Ian have quit the band and are absent, and the small number of guests makes the party seem lonely. One interviewer, in a reference to the Scorese film, asks David if this is Spinal Tap's "Last Waltz." David feebly philosophizes about what "the end" really means, in an attempt to avoid the implications of the question. Derek and Nigel then engage in a classic example of rationalization. Derek asks, "Who wants to be a 45-year-old rock 'n' roller farting around for people less than half our age, cranking out some mediocre head-banging bullshit? . . . It's beneath us." They begin to talk about future projects—for example, a rock musical based on the life of Jack the Ripper ("You're a naughty one, saucy Jack")—that suggest a continued naive promotion of "retarded sexuality." They conclude that they are "lucky." "People should be envying us," Derek says optimistically. "I envy us."

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

This is both a comic and an ironic ending. However much it seems

"lacked on" or "throwaway," it softens the hard edge—the bleakness—of irony by ending with the comedy of social integration.⁵ *This Is Spinal Tap* encourages allegiance with the band members, and especially with Nigel, David, and Derek. Thus, when the band reunites and their fortunes take a wildly fortuitous turn, the audience may be relieved. However, the ending cannot be taken at face value, for this social integration also signifies moral defeat. It ironically suggests that the band has learned nothing from its trials, that its newfound fortunes are undeserved and temporary, and that an audience can be found for just about any music, as long as it's for sale. Moreover, the ending furthers the film's critique of gender discourse in rock culture; this return to the status quo also reconfirms Spinal Tap's hypermasculine posturing.

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

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

Films which satirize the documentary, such as *Mondo Cane* (1963) and Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1957), target the "serious" or "classical" documentary by pointing to silly, incongruous, or shocking subjects, while ironically wearing the mantle of serious investigation. In contrast to these films, the purpose of *This Is Spinal Tap* is not primarily to mock or investigate the sober informational function of the conventional documentary, but like *Zelig* and *Bob Roberts*, to mimic the documentary for other ends. Thus *Bob Roberts* explores the relationships between popular culture and the American electoral process, and *Zelig* examines the possibility of finding personal identity in a world where illusion and reality seem confused, and where the self is defined from the outside.

The effect of *This Is Spinal Tap*, then, is not so much to explore the nature of documentary, as to focus outward, onto another kind of representation—what we might call the social representation of the self. *Bob Roberts*, *Zelig*, and *This Is Spinal Tap* all explore social representation—the representation of the self as political figure (*Bob Roberts*) or masculine ideal (*This Is Spinal Tap*), or the social construction of personal identity generally (*Zelig*). As Hutcheon notes, satire is a means "of bringing the 'world' into art" (104); both satire and parody are useful to contest and/or examine social codes or practices. In this way *This Is Spinal Tap* uses satire to examine and critique heavy metal generally, and in particular, its promotion of a "hypermasculine" mythology, an ethos which reduces sexuality to animal instincts, devalues feminine qualities, and excludes women.

Notes

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

1. Reiner has since become successful as a director and, to a lesser extent, actor, with *The Princess Bride* (1987), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *Misery* (1990), and *A Few Good Men* (1992) among his directorial credits.
2. I assume here that *This Is Spinal Tap* is a fiction film—with a loose script and actors playing roles—which mimics the forms of nonfiction. Some might object that this division is too neat. Some deny a distinction between fiction and nonfiction altogether, pointing out that all (so-called) nonfictions must make use of imaginative form and various manipulations, and thus resemble fictions. See Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, trans. Richard Neupert (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 77–79. This observation, while accurate, is somewhat beside the point. A film is nonfiction not because it lacks imagination or the manipulation of its materials (as though a nonfiction should be a perfect copy or replica of "the real"), but because it is socially marked or indexed, because through it the filmmakers make direct assertions about the actual world, and because when audiences recognize a film as nonfiction, they mobilize different viewing strategies than they do in the case of fiction. See my *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially chapters 1 and 2.
3. The ontological status of the band is more difficult to gauge; after the success of the film, Spinal Tap first played at clubs in Los Angeles and New York, next on *Saturday Night Live*, and then on a full-fledged concert tour. Spinal Tap at that point had become an actual band, but were Guest, McKean, and Shearer members of the band, or simply playing the roles of band members who are fictional characters?
4. An actual heavy metal band would more likely incorporate death than birth imagery into its stage show. This is one respect in which Spinal Tap misses the mark in its imitation of heavy metal.
5. One significant development in heavy metal has been androgynous bands such as Poison and Mötley Crüe, and the adoption by male performers of make-up, costumes, and elaborate hairstyles that have traditionally been associated with female display. While some commentators see such bands as progressive in their deliberate

confusion of traditional gender boundaries (Waiser 131-33), I prefer a less sanguine explanation for their popularity. "Glam" metal, with its stage flamboyance, is calculated to appeal to young women, with whom it finds its largest audience. (Male heavy metal fans are often disdainful of the subgenre.) Through the performers, who are "made-up" in traditionally feminine ways, females gain identificatory entry into a "masculine" world of aggressive power, without threatening traditional feminine identity. *This Is Spinal Tap* was released just as such bands were gaining popularity. Although during concert performances the band occasionally wears stage make-up, the film deals little with the phenomenon of androgyny.

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

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