

Mockumentaries and the Music Industry: Between Flattery and Criticism

Liliana Carneiro Albuquerque

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DIRECTOR DE LA TESI: Dr. Jordi Sánchez-Navarro

TUTOR: Dr. Francesc Xavier Perez Torio

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the relationship between mockumentaries and the music industry. Because this subject has yet to be studied in depth, the original contribution to knowledge is to further examine this relationship. To do so, a literature review documenting what has thus far been written about mockumentaries is provided. This audiovisual strategy is also contextualized within contemporary practices.

In the next section, the music industry is discussed in broad terms. Firstly, the relationship between cinema and music is addressed. Then, music is depicted as a cultural phenomenon, with recent issues also being brought to light.

In the last chapter, four music-related mockumentaries are analysed. Then, extensive conclusions are drawn.

Keywords: *mockumentary, music, audiovisual narrative.*

Resumen

Esta tesis analiza la relación entre la industria de la música y los falsos documentales. Teniendo en cuenta que esta cuestión todavía no se ha estudiado en profundidad, la contribución original al conocimiento es centrarse en el análisis de esta relación. Para ello, una revisión de la literatura se proporciona, discutiendo lo que hasta ahora se ha escrito acerca de falsos documentales. Esta estrategia audiovisual también se estudia en el contexto de otras prácticas audiovisuales contemporáneas.

En la siguiente sección, la industria musical es tratada en términos generales. En primer lugar se aborda la relación entre la música y el cine. A continuación, la industria de la música es analizada como un fenómeno cultural, y además se abordan cuestiones actuales.

En el último capítulo cuatro falsos documentales relacionados con la música son analizados y por último se presentan una serie de conclusiones.

Palabras-clave: *falso documental, música, narrativa audiovisual.*

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Foreword

I remember watching *The Blair Witch Project* in a movie theatre back in Brazil in 1999. It was my second year at university, and although I had a deep passion for cinema, I was unfamiliar with the mockumentary format. Before entering the cinema however, I made sure to read reviews about the film, as I usually did (and still do) before paying for my ticket. The reviews explained that it was indeed a fake documentary, and that it was creating a great deal of commotion across the United States, as plenty of viewers thought that what they were watching was real. It was also said that the directors were using the Internet (which then was still somewhat incipient) to promote the film via its webpage. The site purposely created even more confusion amongst viewers, reinforcing the idea that the “found” footage was in fact real.

Keeping in mind that I was watching pure *mise-en-scène*, I recall being less than impressed. I walked out of the theatre thinking that many other horror films I had seen before were scarier, and that I had just watched an overrated independent film that had somehow turned into a mainstream product. But then I ran into some acquaintances, some slightly younger girls, and they were terrified. They believed with the uttermost certainty that what they had watched was real. I tried to appease them, explaining that it was not real, but they did not believe me. So I just gave up, rolled my eyes and left. And then it occurred to me that to someone who did not know (or wish to acknowledge) that the film was a work of fiction,

it could have been a truly frightening experience. I pondered the peculiarities of this “new” cinematic mode, thinking about those elements in it that could indeed have a great impact on audiences, but as I had other interests at the time (such as film noir and feminist cinema), I did not give it any further consideration.

Sometime later, I came across *Zelig* (1983) and *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), and I thought that they were two of the most brilliant films I had ever seen. *Spinal Tap* in particular made a great impact on me. Although I have never been a musician, I used to spend a lot of time with “wannabe” heavy metal players, making the film even more hilarious to me. After graduating and beginning my MA studies in England, my interests shifted to the comic genre. Suddenly I was more appealed by the works of Charlie Chaplin, Mel Brooks and Monty Python, to name a few examples. Although not all mockumentaries lean towards comedy, many of my favourites fell into this category, and I began to wonder if there was more to explore from this format. Years passed and by the time I began my PhD work at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, I realized that that this was potentially a fruitful subject to research. I noticed that the majority of what had been written about mockumentaries tended to be quite broad in scope: it was either an attempt to classify this “discourse” in general terms or the complete opposite, an analysis of only one individual film.

The more I read and watched, the more I perceived that mockumentaries had managed to create even more subcategories

within the “genre.” I realized that there were quite a few mockumentaries having a music-related theme, and that perhaps these were worth further investigation, not only in the audiovisual context from which they arise, but also in terms of the music industry itself, as previous studies did not tend to address this later aspect. This would also be a good way to combine two of my great interests, cinema and music. This thesis is the result of such research. It has been a considerably long and difficult process, but I believe the results are satisfying, both personally and academically. Nevertheless, the discussion about mockumentaries, of course, is always open, as more and more of them are continually being created. For instance, now that the format has been used in (popular) sitcoms, an entirely new research study could be carried out just for this subcategory.

This is an on-going process because in effect, it survives the completion of the thesis. For me, the feedback I that I receive will be of great value, as I intend to continue studying this subject afterwards, even if it is outside of the formal academic environment. The responses that I receive will hopefully be enlightening to any aspects that I might have overlooked or any possible contradictions in the text. Also, the avowal (if any) of what I have done well could be an indication of what I should potentially invest even more time on. For the moment, all I can say is this: I hope you enjoy my work and that it will be as thought-provocative for you as it has been for me.

1. MOCKUMENTARIES AND THE MUSIC INDUSTRY: ISSUES AND PROPOSED APPROACH

Fake-documentaries are films that present themselves as documentaries, but which in reality are as fictional as any other fiction. This “genre” is also known as mock-documentary or mockumentary (the preferred term in this research) depending on the context in which they are analysed, or on the films themselves. There are quite a few examples of this category of audiovisual products, and there has been a fair amount of academic discussion about the subject already. One relevant example is the work of Hight and Roscoe (2001), which established some of the parameters for the analysis of this type of movie. However, one less frequently approached theme is the relation between mockumentaries and the music industry. Interestingly enough, there are some significant movies that bring both of these two manifestations of the culture industry, such as *This Is Spinal Tap* (directed by Rob Reiner, 1984), *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (directed by Eric Idle and Gary Weis, 1978) and *A Mighty Wind* (directed by Christopher Guest, 2003) to cite some examples. *This Is Spinal Tap*, for instance, makes direct references to the world of “rockumentaries”: documentaries that follow rock bands through the ups and downs of rehearsing, touring, in-fighting, song-writing and so forth.

Considering that this relationship between the mockumentary mode

and the music industry has yet to be studied in great depth, the aim of this thesis is to focus specifically on mockumentaries which portray the music world in some way. By mocking “real” documentaries, these mockumentaries mostly try to demonstrate that the mediated truth is not necessarily the whole truth. By mocking the music industry, they seem to establish a relation that is of both criticism and flattery.

This research shall therefore contribute to the debate about whether mockumentaries are simply postmodern artifices that do not engage meaningfully with the texts they originally draw from, or if, alternatively, they manage to somehow communicate more effectively to and with the public than other movies, capturing something of the essence of the subject despite (or even because) of their overt mocking tone. This research will also address the extent to which mockumentaries challenge traditional forms of narrative by turning them upside-down.

One of the most important concerns of cinema (and other audiovisual media in general) is the concept of reality. As regards the ways in which reality is depicted in documentaries, for instance, Brian Winston writes that a contemporary approach to the subject should overcome the traditional Griersonian framework and hence, become something else¹. He draws his arguments from other authors (such as André Bazin) and revisits how audiovisual realism

¹ See WINSTON, B., 1995. *Claiming the real: the Griersonian documentary and its legitimations*. London: BFI.

was historically built. His arguments are especially valid today, when audiences have a more knowing and suspicious attitude to what they watch, and conspiracy theories have become more widespread. Winston even gives examples of controversial events that gripped the UK media in the late 1990s, to develop his argument still further². In fact, he actually praises fake documentaries as an alternative means of approaching and criticizing those “actuality” claims³. Winston’s concepts are very relevant to many of the subjects that are going to be dealt with in this research. For example, he establishes a relationship between traditional fiction and documentary practices, while also indicating paths that can be taken on the “creative treatment of actuality”⁴. Ultimately, Winston declares that the ethics and creativity of the filmmakers should be the most important aspects of a film, and if both of these requirements are fulfilled, in a way it does not matter if a film is a work of fiction or a documentary. Similar concepts are discussed in the following chapter, this time citing arguments given by Alisa Lebow (2006).

In the case of fictional cinema, the concept of realism has been tackled by academics such as Stephen Neale (1980) and David Bordwell (1986), the former discussing more specifically the issues of narrative and genre: specifically, how different genres utilise different narrative tools. As both authors state, most of the narrative

² See WINSTON, B., 2000. *Lies, damn lies and documentaries*. London: BFI.

³ In: See WINSTON, B., 1995. *Claiming the real: the Griersonian documentary and its legitimations*. London: BFI, pp. 202-3.

⁴ This is the definition of film documentary given by Grierson.

style films (i.e. Hollywood classics) try to sell themselves as realistic: plots have to be believable, as if whatever is happening on screen could happen in real life. However, as is well known, realism is an impossible brief for a film to fulfil completely, because making films is an entirely artificial process: it involves writing, acting, editing, creating artificial settings and so on. Therefore, documentaries have always presented themselves as a more truthful way of representing reality: there are no actors, there is no plot to follow and editing supposedly is necessary only to sum up what the audience should see. As if making documentaries does not involve choosing a specific point of view to defend. As if there was only one universal concept of reality.

In this way, mockumentaries can perhaps avoid the traps set both by fiction and documentary works. By locating themselves somewhere in between the two, they simply throw away any given or established concepts of reality and manage to create something else. Criticized sometimes as being simple parodies (which is a fair judgement in some cases), mockumentaries can nonetheless give new perspectives about subjects where seemingly there were no new perspectives to be had. The case of *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* is a good example of this: it is a film that says much more about The Beatles than any other documentary that had been made about the real band before.

In the case of music related mockumentaries, the use of this format seems even more appropriate. As Brian Winston points out (1995,

p. 155), with the rise of “fly-on-the-wall” documentaries in the 1960s, one specific subgenre that gained attention and a level of popularity unlike that of other types of documentaries was the rockumentary. Hence, making mockumentaries that drew from this kind of film was in a way the obvious next step. Music mockumentaries put certain musical genres under the spotlight, trying to make a comment about that environment and about the people who produce – and those who consume – a specific style. This can be done in the spirit of admiration or respect for the chosen topic, but it can also be a powerful way to criticize it. The world of rock and roll, for example, with its stories of sex, overdoses, exaggerated performances and money provides plentiful opportunities for parody⁵. By dealing with the subject in a way that is neither similar to traditional fictions, nor to purely documentary perspectives, mockumentaries about the music industry might be the best tool to reveal its essence.

It is also important to point out that mockumentaries tend not to be taken as seriously as they should be from an academic perspective, which is yet another reason to investigate them further. One of the most interesting aspects of mockumentaries, for example, is exactly how they tend to combine elements of a genre that is usually underestimated academically (comedy) with another that generally attracts a lot of attention from critics (documentaries).

⁵ See HISPANO, A. and SÁNCHEZ-NAVARRO, J., ed., 2001. *Imágenes para la sospecha: falsos documentales y otras piruetas de la no-ficción*. Barcelona: Glénat, p. 25.

Hight and Roscoe define mockumentaries (though they actually prefer the term ‘mock-documentary’, here we use our chosen term for methodological purposes) as “*fictional* texts; those which make a partial or concerted effort to appropriate documentary codes and conventions in order to represent a fictional object” (2001, p. 2). This will be the definition that will guide this research.

As aforementioned, substantial academic discussion has already been had about the dichotomy of documentary vs. drama (for example in Brian Winston’s body of work), and also about documentary vs. mockumentary (especially by Hight and Roscoe, 2001). More consideration has also been given to mockumentaries that approach the so-called rockumentaries, although as was argued before, these previous studies seemed to be lacking in depth. This is probably due to the fact that they usually focused more on general aspects of the fake-documentary as a cinematic mode rather than seeking for a wider context. This research intends to stretch this view about the “mock-rockumentaries”, by taking the discussion about mockumentaries to a scope that goes beyond the issue of reality vs. fiction. Of course this dichotomy will still be dealt with, but mostly through a different lens.

For instance, one relevant contemporary issue related to the mockumentary form is that it seems to have reached a certain level of vulgarisation nowadays: there are a number of motion pictures and even television series that use this audiovisual strategy as an intrinsic narrative device. Hence the mockumentary is no longer an

exception, a novelty. This is very telling of how informed current audiences are, and therefore, this should affect any analysis of the subject. Given the “overmediated” world we live in nowadays, the mockumentary seems to be just one more strategy for blending fact and fiction, amongst others such as docudramas and even reality shows. To discover how our chosen texts fit in this universe is one of the main goals of this research.

To shed some light on the issue, we must look at the role of the audiences as well. The relevance of these films can also be understood when we pay attention to the relationship their public tends to establish with them. In order to fully “get the joke”, you must be “in the know”, not only by being aware that what you are watching is a mockumentary, but also by knowing something of the context to which it refers. In the case of *The Rutles*, for example, to fully appreciate the film the viewer must know something about The Beatles. If they did not have some knowledge of the Fab Four they could perhaps still enjoy it, but not with the same level of understanding. This is probably one of the reasons why mockumentaries also imply some level of admiration and respect towards the subject that they mock. In this way, studying the context in which these films are produced and consumed is also necessary to the analysis.

1.1. Main research questions

Some questions arise when considering mockumentaries related to the music industry, and the main purpose of this research is to address them. A very basic and obvious question, for example, is what role do they play in the contemporary media world, where information and entertainment options abound? There are quite a few examples of audiovisual works that use the mockumentary mode nowadays, and some of those will be commented on here in order to extend our knowledge of the issue in a broader sense. As for mockumentaries related to the music industry, most of them were made years ago, but they can still be analysed with a current perspective.

Of course merely alluding to examples is not sufficient. There should be a more in-depth examination of them. One follow-up question could address whether or not they establish a relationship of flattery or criticism in regards to what they mock – both the documentary genre and more specifically, the musical genres and the music industry as a whole. There seems to be an on-going tension between flattery and criticism, but each individual case must be analysed in order to draw more specific conclusions. It is possible that each example looked at will offer a different answer, but some general conclusions might also be drawn.

Another question that arises from the previous one is whether or not the main target of mockery is the documentary genre in general

terms (or rockumentary, for that matter), or if the banter is directed more towards the specific subjects that they depict, such as The Beatles in the case of *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*. What do they consider to be more important, form or content? Are they trying to make a commentary about documentaries and have therefore chosen the mock-doc mode as a means of expression? Or did they decide that it would be the most appropriate format for other reasons?

Whichever the case may be, mockumentaries parody previously and commonly known audiovisual texts. Of course, in order to better appreciate them, the viewer must have some prior knowledge about what is being mocked, both the rockumentaries and the specific musical genres. Nonetheless, if a less than cognizant viewer came across a music mockumentary, would he/she still be able to find some level of enjoyment in those texts? It has been reported that at times, when watching a mockumentary, some viewers get confused as to whether or not what they are watching is “real”⁶, and there are, of course, cases that intentionally create confusion (hoaxes). This seems to indicate that if a fake documentary is made effectively (i.e., to the point of creating an interpretational mess), it can potentially stand on its own, even if that means that the audience only understood half of the “joke”⁷. In the case of music mockumentaries, are these films designed specifically for a

⁶ Costa Botes’ and Peter Jackson’s *Forgotten Silver* (1995) is a classic example of this.

⁷ Consider this for example with the Hight and Roscoe analysis of *Forgotten Silver* (2001, pp. 144-150), in which they discuss its impact on audiences and other aspects of the film.

knowing audience? Or can they also stand by themselves? That is, do they add sufficient meaning to the subjects that they portray so that it is not necessary to have a lot of previous expertise on what they depict?

All of this creates even further questions, not only regarding documentaries but also concerning other audiovisual genres and their strategies, such as comedy and issues of narrative. All things considered, perhaps the biggest question is actually: why do the creators of music mockumentaries decide to use this format, instead of making “regular” documentaries or “normal” fictional films? For instance, would a real documentary about a Heavy Metal band be just as funny as *This Is Spinal Tap*? And what if *Fear of a Black Hat* (directed by Rusty Cundieff, 1993) was just a comedy about a rap group? This research will not necessarily be able to determine the clear intentions of the authors, not only because the investigation does not include interviews with them, but also because the idea here is to discover some polysemous interpretations. As in most cases related to Film Studies, there is no answer that can be provided with the utmost certainty, but rather, there are possibilities. In order to determine some of those possibilities, this research study proposes a methodology, which will be described in the next segment.

1.2. Proposed approach

To start off, a literature review is provided, including what has been written thus far about the dichotomy documentary vs. mockumentary. This initial chapter will then discuss mockumentaries in the broader context of Film Studies. Their origins and relationship with documentaries will be examined, taxonomies will be presented and examples will be provided (including contemporary ones). The framework provided by the works of Hight and Roscoe (2001), and Juhasz and Lerner (2006) will offer particular enlightenment regarding the subject.

Next, the relationship between mockumentaries and comedy will be analysed. Fake documentaries are not necessarily made with the intention of being funny, but in the case of music-related ones, there seems to be a predominance of comic texts. The reason why this happens is one of the issues to be discussed, along with others, such as narrative matters. Despite using traditional documentary codes, mockumentaries tend to follow a plot structure, and scrutinizing this will be very enlightening for our research. To end the chapter, a section dedicated to music mockumentaries will be provided, indicating their origins and examples beyond the four core ones (those which were chosen as the main focus of this research).

Music mockumentaries derive from other audiovisual formats, such as musicals and music documentaries. Furthermore, there are other types of audiovisual works that feature music-related themes, even

though they do not fit the profile of the two previous examples. For a thorough look at the main subject it will be necessary to address some of those examples in this research. Therefore, a chapter dealing with the relationship between cinema and music is essential for better comprehension of the mockumentaries featured here, and in order to identify the wider context from which they emerge in visual terms.

Next, a general discussion of the music industry will also be useful for the research study, as much of what happens in this universe is featured in the scrutinized movies. Music genres, production issues and even current consumption patterns will be addressed. For this section, the work of British sociologist Simon Frith will be particularly enlightening. Frith dedicated his academic life to understanding music as a cultural phenomenon, and therefore his writings may clarify some of the key issues proposed here.

The following chapter features four case studies that deal with prominent music industry-related mockumentaries. One of the core purposes of this research is to draw general conclusions regarding this specific audiovisual mode, although the aim is not to analyse all music mockumentaries that have been produced so far. The selected films are *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Fear of A Black Hat* and *A Mighty Wind*. Each of the examples was created in a different decade. Each features a different music style, and each is meaningful in its own particular way. Therefore, together, they should provide this investigation with a panoramic

view of the subject matter, while also offering specific insights from each case. The analysis will focus on the narrative tools used in those films and any peculiarities that they might present when compared to each other. Their principal characteristics should offer this research some clues that will help to answer the proposed questions.

Then, extensive conclusions will be drawn. The final part will summarise and combine what was previously looked at, so as to clearly illuminate the issues regarding mockumentaries related to the music industry. As previously stated, the main goal is to develop a formularization that encompasses general and particular characteristics about that kind of audiovisual text. It should prove insightful to take a look at them in the broader context of mockumentaries, as well as music-related audiovisual products, and also as commentaries on the music industry in general. However, the main focus will be on the case studies, as it is only through factual examples that this research study will be able to consistently address the issues at hand.

Finally, researching mockumentaries related to the music industry has proven to be somewhat amusing. Therefore, it seems inappropriate to be excessively formal in this study. The writing style should therefore be concise and somewhat engaging. This obviously does not suggest that this research should not be taken seriously, but that the subject requires a certain degree of open-

mindedness and the will to be amused. With that in mind, let the process begin.

2. THE MOCKUMENTARY AS AN AUDIOVISUAL STRATEGY

This chapter deals with the mockumentary format in broader terms. Firstly, an explanation of the cinematic origins of mockumentaries is offered. Key theoretical concepts are also provided through a literature review. Next, contemporary examples (including television series) and various issues are addressed.

The relationship between the comic genre and the mockumentary mode is also discussed. To conclude the chapter, the origins of music-related mockumentaries are traced and some more examples are provided.

2.1. Documentaries vs. Mockumentaries

The intricate relationship between documentaries and mockumentaries has already been analyzed in a number of studies, including those of Hight and Roscoe (2001), Ward (2005), Juhasz and Lerner (2006), and Rhodes and Springer (2006). One common characteristic found in these works is that mockumentaries tend to scrutinize the subject using theoretical frameworks that were previously used only in the documentary genre. For example, the taxonomies established in mockumentaries are the same as those used in documentaries, since the structures of the former are always borrowed from the latter. Therefore, it is necessary to first

determine some of the main characteristics of the documentary genre before moving on to the mockumentary format.

One of the most referential names when discussing documentaries is Bill Nichols. He has written extensively on the subject and has established some guidelines that might be useful to this research. Defining documentary, for instance, seems rather difficult, because it seems to entail many different concepts. Nonetheless, Nichols has some ideas that might prove enlightening. For instance, he states that documentaries can be understood through the expectations of the audience rather than the intentions of the creator. If narrative cinema offers its public scopophilia⁸ (visual pleasure), documentaries offer them the pleasure of learning: “Documentary realism aligns itself with an epistophilia, so to speak, pleasure in knowing, that marks out a distinctive form of social engagement” (1991, p. 178). Epistophilia appears to be one of the determining characteristics of documentaries. In fact, most of these films do have a rather didactic nature, as they tend to aspire to educate their audiences about serious social matters. Based on this premise, Nichols tries to offer a general overview of the genre:

“Documentaries, then, offer aural and visual likeness or representations of some part of the historical world. They stand for or represent the views of individuals, groups, and institutions. They also make representations, mount arguments, or formulate persuasive strategies of their own, setting out to persuade us to

⁸ See MULVEY, L., 1975. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In: *Screen*, vol. 16, n° 3, pp. 6-18.

accept their views as appropriate. The degree to which one or more of these aspects of representation come into play will vary from film to film, but the idea of representation itself is central to documentary” (2001, p. 5).

Hence, representation is also crucial to the documentary genre. Nichols also developed a taxonomy scheme, suggesting that there are six basic documentary types. Here are their descriptions, according to the author (*Ibid.*, pp. 33-34):

“Poetic Mode: emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization. (...)

Expository mode: emphasizes verbal commentary and an argumentative logic. (...) This is the mode that most people identify with documentary in general. (...)

Observational mode: emphasizes a direct engagement with everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera. (...)

Participatory mode: emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement. Often coupled with archival footage to examine historical issues. (...)

Reflexive mode: calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking. Increases awareness of the constructedness of the film’s representation of reality. (...)

Performative mode: emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker’s own engagement with the subject and an audience’s responsiveness to this engagement. Rejects notions of objectivity in favour of evocation and affect.”

These classifications are also useful when describing mockumentaries. As will be demonstrated from the case studies, most music-related documentaries tend to use the observational mode. It could be argued, however, that *This Is Spinal Tap*, for instance, borderlines on the participatory mode as the director is shown interacting with the band quite a few times. Nonetheless, his influence is not particularly impacting on the events; hence the film aligns itself more with the observational mode. Similarly, *Fear of a Black Hat* and *A Mighty Wind* are observational, even though all of the three aforementioned examples also make use of b-roll images⁹ to complement what is being shown. As for *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*, it is mostly expository, as it does not follow the band in the “present” and all of the sources of information are indirect, thus the film has to make considerable use of archived images.

Historically, the origin of documentaries as we now know them can be traced back to the works of directors such as Robert J. Flaherty and John Grierson. There was, however, a transitional period at the beginning of the cinema era, when films did not exactly fit either the documentary profile, or that of fictional works¹⁰. In a way, this early stage relates to the mockumentary format as well. In 1933, Luis Buñuel created a film that even today is considered one of the most groundbreaking (mock?) documentaries ever made: *Las*

⁹ Extra footage from archives and other sources that might help contextualize what else is being depicted by the “fly-on-the-wall” method.

¹⁰ Charlie Keil writes about this primordial blurry period in an article entitled *Steel Engines and Engines and Cardboard Rockets: The Status of Fiction and Nonfiction in Early Cinema* (in: JUHASZ, A. and LERNER, J., (ed.). *F is for Phony: Fake Documentaries and The Truth's Undoing*, 2006, pp. 39-49).

Hurdes, or *Tierra Sin Pan (Land Without Bread)*. The film depicts the life of inhabitants of a small, poor and isolated village in Spain. Nevertheless, Buñuel used many meta/self-referential devices in the film, including staged situations. Nichols considers the film to be a reflexive documentary, and according to him it “might be a highly political film that calls the ethics of documentary filmmaking itself into question” (*Ibid.*, p. 9). Hight and Roscoe (2001), however, consider it to be a mock documentary.

There is indeed some confusion between the performative and reflexive modes and mockumentaries, so each case should be taken into consideration when making classifications. Hight and Roscoe also consider the mockumentary mode to be more subversive than the reflexive and performative modes, as they believe it further questions the validity of documentary filmmaking: “Perhaps the reflexive and performative modes are, in fact, not that radical after all, and do not have mock-documentary’s potential to go to the core of the documentary genre”. (2001, p. 182). They also state that one of the weaknesses of documentaries is that they tend to sell the idea that they only depict facts, that they are impartial to any subjectivities: “Documentary has in the past capitalised on these associations between facts and truth, by claiming that its photographic lens is capable of recording the facts about the social world” (*Ibid.*, p. 10). They continue this argument: “Ultimately, documentary also relies on the wider discourses of photography and the assumed power and the ability of the camera to access and portray reality” (*Ibid.*, p. 181).

The issue of what is factual/real or not is indeed very symptomatic of both documentaries and mockumentaries, and this has been a topic of continuous questioning. For example, it is known today that fundamental documentaries such as *Nanook of the North* (directed by Flaherty in 1922) also included staged “scenes”, even though it had no reflexive or mock intentions: it is mostly considered to be a representation of reality. Was it fair then to stage some of the events if the intention was to accurately portray the life of the Inuk people? At times, it can be very hard to determine the limits that should be set for documentaries (if any), and that sort of reasoning leads to the ultimate question: what is “reality” anyway? Stella Bruzzi offers an alternative perspective on the issue of representing reality. According to her:

“a documentary will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate the reality by being representational. Furthermore, the spectator is not in need of signposts and inverted commas to understand that a documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, representation and bias on the other. Documentary is predicated upon a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text itself reveals the tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim.” (2006, pp. 6-7).

As for mockumentaries, instead of providing an answer to the issue, they play around with the concept of realistic representation, sometimes just for “fun” and other times with more critical

purposes. Because of this, Hight and Roscoe determine three degrees for mock documentaries, depending on the levels of engagement with the subject and criticism to the documentary genre. They have summarized their scheme as follows, based on the intentions of the creators:

“Degree 1 Parody: To parody, and implicitly reinforce, an aspect of popular culture.

Degree 2 Critique: To use the documentary form to engage in a parody or satire of an aspect of popular culture.

Degree 3 Deconstruction: To critique an aspect of popular culture. To examine, subvert and deconstruct factual discourse and its relationship with documentary codes and conventions.” (2001, p. 73).

Using this scheme, Hight and Roscoe argue that mock rockumentaries such as *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash* and *This Is Spinal Tap* should be classified as degree 1. They believe that those films do not extend beyond the parody aspect, and that in fact they are actually reverential at times to the subjects that they portray. With regards to *Spinal Tap*, for example, they write that “...perhaps the band’s fans can enjoy the attitude of an openly fictional band as an antidote to the pretensions of real rock band that takes themselves too seriously” (*Ibid.*, p. 123). Hence, the film would be more of a praising than a critique of rock and roll in general.

Nonetheless, as will be demonstrated more thoroughly with the case studies, both *The Rutles* and *Spinal Tap*, along with *Fear of A Black Hat*, do tend to display a lot of criticism in regards to what they depict, hence this research prefers to describe them as degree 2. It is true that these three examples do not go as far as degree 3, since they are not extremely critical of the documentary genre per se, and they focus more on the musical styles that they mock rather than the cinematic issues. As for *A Mighty Wind*, it can be categorized as degree 1, since it actually shows some fondness to the genre it portrays, folk music (albeit still being critical of the music industry itself).

It is also relevant to mention that very few films can be categorized as degree 3, as this would imply on a direct attack on the documentary genre. Some examples are *The Forgotten Silver* and *C'est arrivé près de chez vous (Man Bites Dog, 1992)*. The former simulated the life of a “forgotten” New Zealand early cinema director, and it can be considered degree 3 for its hoax intention, for demonstrating that the audience can be rather gullible to whatever is shown on television. The latter, a Flemish production, depicts a filming crew becoming more and more involved with the actions of a serial killer. It falls under degree 3 mode due to its portrayal of how there seems to be no limit when displaying violence.

It is also important to note that Hight and Roscoe undermine the role of the audience as compared to the intentions of the creators. They say that “The role constructed for the audience by the text

offers only one preferred meaning – it does not determine the text’s definitive meaning, or necessarily the text’s ultimate position in relation to factual discourse” (*Ibid.*, p. 53). This might be one of the reasons why instead of using the word “genre” for mockumentaries (since audiences are the ones who tend to categorize films into genres), they prefer to understand mock documentaries as a “discourse”, “format” or audiovisual “mode”, one that is somewhere in between facts and fictions, especially in these overmediated postmodern times that we currently live in. They argue that “Mock documentary might be considered as a transitional discourse, a form that takes full advantage of technological developments and our insecurities concerning factual discourse” (*Ibid.*, p. 189).

As for the historical origins of mockumentaries, Hight and Roscoe attribute them to different sources, from April Fools’ Day fake news to Orson Welles’ 1938 radio prank of *War of The Worlds*. It is true that journalism and radio, with their connection to factuality, are media that allow this sort of simulation. On the contrary, it would be hard to have, for example, a mock theatre play or work of literature (perhaps New Journalism would share some commonalities with the mock format, but those would still be limited). Hence, news press, radio and any type of realist audiovisual media can adhere to mock gimmicks with more ease. One early example of this combination is the segment *News on the March* on *Citizen Kane* (1941), where the main character’s life is shown as a mini-documentary. The segment serves as a contrast

between the official version of Kane's life and the rest of the film, the other side (truth?) about him that is portrayed.

The true development of fake documentaries happened from the 1960s onwards, along with the development of direct cinema. One early example is *David Holzman's Diary* (1967), which spoofs the process of documentary filmmaking by showing a (fictional) director trying to make one himself. In 1969 Woody Allen released *Take the Money and Run*, which also used mock techniques. Allen created other mockumentaries later, the most remarkable one being *Zelig*, making considerable use of historical data and images (which would then be edited with the presence of the human chameleon Zelig). This film has been highly praised by critics for its meta qualities. Ruth Perlmutter, for example, writes that:

“If the persona of Zelig and the essence of Zeligism turn on the irony of accommodation, the film itself reflects on the transformative and ultimately duplicitous nature of the film. Zelig, the comic subject, and *Zelig* the film, the metatext, encompass the paradox of parody. Not only are they both self-engendering – Zelig spins identities out of himself like a caterpillar, while the film strives to control the subject (as character/author) *and* the narrative. They are also self-transgressive – humor and irony arise out of Zelig's violation of norms, while he and the text incorporate and adapt to them” (1991, p. 217).



Figure 1: Zelig with Eugene O'Neill, in one of the many photomontages of the film.

Besides having self-referential characteristics, films like *Zelig* also deal with the age-old discussion of the differences between parody and satire. Again, it would be necessary to analyse the films separately to determine if they are more parodic or satirical. In as far as it depicts relevant facts about the twentieth century, I would actually categorize *Zelig* as a satire. Therefore, besides the 3 degrees established by Hight and Roscoe, determining whether or not a text is more of a parody or a satire is another potential way of scrutinizing them. Alexandra Juhasz has some ideas about the subject. She states that mockumentaries are: "...both parody *and* satire (...) Parodies look first to texts, satires toward the world. As parody, fake documentary "both is and represents" (to use Hutcheon's terms) documentary; as satire, it also is and feigns documentary's referent, the moral, social, political, and historical". (2006, p. 2). Combining Juhasz's definitions with the degree system

of Hight and Roscoe, perhaps it can be said that while parody is equivalent to degree 1, satire would adhere both to degrees 2 and 3.

Juhasz also offers some more definitions and perspectives of the mock format. She declares that: "...fake documentaries are fiction films that make use of (copy, mock, mimic, gimmick) documentary style and therefore acquire its associated content (the moral and the social) and associated feelings (belief, trust, authenticity) to create a documentary experience defined by their antithesis, self-conscious distance" (*Ibid.*, p. 7). She also reminds us that "Fake documentaries are at least in part fiction films, but we receive them as in part like a documentary" (*Ibid.*, p. 8). This is relevant because it implies that to some extent (even if unconsciously), the audience will find more closeness to the "truth" in mockumentaries than in regular fictions.

This might be one of the reasons why Christopher Guest, for instance, one of the creative minds behind *This Is Spinal Tap* and director of a few other mockumentaries, often chooses this format instead of other more traditional forms of fiction. One of the common characteristics of all of Guest's films is that they deal with people's expectations of grandeur, be it aspiring small town actors as in *Waiting for Guffman* (1996) or people living out their dreams of fame through their dogs in *Best in Show* (2000). Interestingly enough, in spite of their unrealistic aspirations, the characters still

manage to inspire sympathy. As Kent Jones states¹¹, Guest's films "allow us to laugh at and with their characters at the same time".

As previously mentioned, the issue of representation of reality is indeed one of the most significant ones when addressing the subject of mockumentaries. There are, however, alternatives to the usual real vs. fiction dichotomy. Some of these might be actually rather radical. For instance, Alisa Lebow uses Lacanian ideas (albeit slightly modified by Žižek) in her article *Faking What? Making a Mockery of Documentary*¹² to state there is no such a thing as reality or "purely factual" documentaries. She writes that: "reality itself is a mockumentary, for which there is no "doc"" (2006, p. 235). In fact, she goes on to praise mockumentaries for being closer to Lacan's concept of the "Real": "...it is precisely fantasy that is necessary to achieve a glimpse of the Real. With its imaginative flights of fancy (or more precisely fantasy) mockumentary may be just different enough from documentary to achieve such glimpse" (*Ibid.*, p. 235).

Perhaps the complex relationship between documentaries and mockumentaries need not be so complicated after all, as if there was a constant fight occurring between reality and fiction. There are ways of understanding both types of texts besides merely interpreting the intentions of the creators, or imagining audience

¹¹ *The Democratic Humor of Christopher Guest*. In: *Film Comment*, November/December 2006 issue.

¹² In: JUHASZ, A. and LERNER, J., (ed.). *F is for Phony: Fake Documentaries and The Truth's Undoing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

expectations, or mixing both of these frameworks. Documentaries have established visual codes over the decades and these codes are probably still going to be used for a long time, despite critiques that they might have suffered from degree 3 mockumentaries. They are very useful when depicting “serious” matters and when trying to convey social issues in a more direct manner. As for mockumentaries, as will be shown, they are “in fashion”, and given the current appeal of reality texts, they may stick around for quite a while. Each case has to be individually scrutinized in order to try to determine its purposes, and to do so, the degrees scheme from Hight and Roscoe is quite useful.

Another way of regarding documentaries and their mock texts involves focusing more on the overall meaning rather than finding out if what is being portrayed is real or not. One recent film is a good example of this: *Exit Through The Gift Shop* (2010), directed by Banksy. It depicts the world of street art and is very critical to the aspirations of fame and fortune of some wannabe artists. It accomplishes this by describing the rise to fame of a French “artist” who was once just a gift shop owner but who later on became involved with the street art movement. The film created huge debates online, as audiences wondered if it was a documentary or a mock text, if it was yet another prank from Banksy on us or not. In the end, it does not actually seem to matter. The film is meaningful either way, as it conveys a message, be it a documentary or a mockumentary. Thus, films like *Exit Through The Gift Shop* might indicate new perspectives, new ways of constructing and

understanding those audiovisual texts. In the following section, more current matters and examples will be discussed.

2.1.1. Contemporary issues and examples

What was once a format used in experimental cinema, the mockumentary mode has become increasingly well-known over recent years. Quite a few directors, such as the aforementioned Woody Allen, Peter Greenaway (*The Falls*, 1980) and Robert Altman (*Bob Roberts*, 1994)¹³ have all experimented with this audiovisual strategy over the decades. Now, the format can be found not only in films but also in television series. This gain in popularity can be attributed to some factors that will be discussed in this section.

Firstly, it is relevant to note that this rise in popularity began around the end of the twentieth century, early years of the new millennia, as the use of the Internet as a marketing tool also grew. The first mockumentary to make it big at the box office by using the Internet to promote itself was *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)¹⁴. The horror movie's website reinforced the idea that the found footage was

¹³ *Bob Roberts* is an amusing case due to its mix of music and politics. Altman combined both elements previously in *Nashville* (1975), which in spite of not being a fake documentary, adheres to his directorial trait of trying to portray the subjects in an extremely realistic manner.

¹⁴ Craig Hight discusses the case of *The Blair Witch Project* in *Cross-platform mockumentary: a call to play*. In: *Archivos de la Filmoteca – revista de estudios históricos sobre la imagen*, nº 57-58, vol. 2, pp. 176-195. In this article he talks about contemporary uses of the mock format across different media.

indeed real, thus contributing to the growth of its fame. Other horror mockumentaries were later created using similar techniques, such as *[Rec]* and *Paranormal Activity* (both released in 2007). Both films also had sequels and are examples of the affinities between the mockumentary mode and the horror genre. A whole other thesis could be written to study such affinities, but for the moment, suffice it to say that these can be traced back historically to films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), which inaugurated the point-of-view/found footage technique. Horror films benefit from the mockumentary format as it may easily lead the audience to be confused by what they are watching, believing that it is all true, and thus, increasing the level of fear¹⁵.

Gullible audiences also became the “victims” of yet another rising format of the late 1990s onwards: reality TV. As Jelle Mast writes on his article about the use of the mock-documentary mode in contemporary Flemish television series, “These fictions that look and sound like documentaries – to put it rather straightforwardly – have taken a great appeal as ‘reality television’ (...) established itself as a staple aspect of contemporary television an popular culture”¹⁶. Thus, perhaps the current popularity of the mockumentary mode in television can be primarily explained by the rise of reality shows as opposed to the cinematic style from which

¹⁵ See Gary Rhodes article about the issue: *Mockumentaries and the production of realist horror*. Available online at:

<http://www.freepatentsonline.com/article/Post-Script/95501717.html>

¹⁶ MAST, J., 2009. *New directions in hybrid popular television: a reassessment of television mock-documentary*. In: *Media Culture Society*, vol. 21, n° 2, pp. 231-250

they have derived. Stella Bruzzi, in the second edition of her book *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* makes a similar point. The first edition was released in the year 2000, when reality television first had its boom, so Bruzzi updated her arguments in the 2006 edition, depicting the aftermath and influence of such “realist” audiovisual strategies.

Some examples might clarify the matter and indicate in which cases the inspiration was mainly from the mockumentary mode and in which cases it came from somewhere else. The original version of *The Office* (2001 – 2003), for example, was indeed groundbreaking, as it drew from mockumentaries such as *This Is Spinal Tap*¹⁷ to renew the old-fashioned sitcom genre. As Brett Mills observes in an article that discusses the series:

“the conventional sitcom form has been repeatedly challenged in recent years. Programme makers have begun to abandon some of the genre’s most obvious conventions and have replaced them with the formal characteristics of other, distinct genres. In this way, the distinction between the ways in which the comedic and the serious are conventionally signalled have begun to be dismantled, and this has occurred in a manner that explicitly questions television’s role in setting up such distinction”. (Mills, 2004, p. 68)

The Office always remained true to the codes of cinéma vérité, as there would not be any moments where traditional fiction

¹⁷ Its creator, Ricky Gervais, is a self-declared fan of *This Is Spinal Tap*, as he says for example in an interview for the DVD extras of the film (2009 release).

techniques were applied. In order to capture the characters in private moments, for instance, when they would not be simply “acting out” to the camera, the series made use of covert filming, when the characters would not know that they were being shot. The series also made use of hand held cameras, abolished the laughter track, and used more realistic settings instead of the phony studio ones.

In 2005, an American version of *The Office* was released. Unlike many original British series that are adapted to the American market only to be axed after a few episodes (as cultural differences seem to weigh in negatively), *The Office* managed to be quite successful and is still being produced. At first it stayed true to the conventions used in the original series version. However, as the seasons went on, some traditional fiction codes began to take over. For instance, the camera sometimes “goes” to places and situations that would definitely not be a part of a documentary being produced about an office. Those are moments when the series approaches a traditional sitcom.

Moreover, the reason why the employers of the company are being filmed is never fully explained. The audience does not really get to know if it is for a reality show or for a documentary, and this could be regarded as a narrative inconsistency. In mockumentary films there is usually a direct reference to the purposes of the (fake) documentary: as examples, in *This Is Spinal Tap* we meet the director, Marty DiBergi (Rob Reiner), and the same in *Fear of a*

Black Hat, as we get to know Nina Blackburn (Kasi Lemmons). The closest to a clarification was offered in the final episode of Steve Carrel's character (season 7, episode 22, *Goodbye Michael*), when just before leaving he says to the crew: "Hey, will you guys let me know if that ever airs?" From this line it can be inferred that the filming is being made for a still unaired reality show. This is strange, to say the least, as there seems to be no plausible reason as to why would they be filming an office for an unreleased show for more than eight years.

The mockumentary format is also used in *Parks and Recreations* (2009-...) and *Modern Family* (2009-...), the latter being one of the most popular and awarded series nowadays. *Modern Family*, however, poses an even bigger inconsistency for its own diegesis than *The Office* does: the characters give "private" comments (or interviews) to the camera about what is happening in their lives. While these commentaries are made to let the audience know how they feel, there is no real connection between one "reality" and the other. If there were, then perhaps what the characters say in the comments would have an impact on the action. That is, after watching a commentary, one character could perhaps say to another: "I cannot believe you said that about me", or "I am sorry I made you feel that way", etc. However, the featured families are not explicitly part of a reality show or a documentary, and the cameras are not acknowledged during the "normal" action, hence the private commentary device is merely an accessory. Yet, the comments contribute to the comicality of the series, and they demonstrate that

audiences have gotten used to a certain visual style, to a specific way of “storytelling”. It can be argued that this has likely been inherited from reality shows (which, on the other hand, are becoming more and more fictitious), as they usually feature private comments parallel to the main “action”, as opposed to being an influence of the mockumentary mode.



Figure 2: *Modern Family's* private commentaries may be more an inheritance from Reality TV rather than from the mockumentary format.

It is also relevant to note that all of those series are intended to be comedies¹⁸, which, as it will be demonstrated in the following section, is quite compatible with the mock format. Incidentally, as will be discussed later (in particular in the case studies chapter), the mockumentary mode does imply certain dramatic restrictions, as

¹⁸ Another popular comic series worth note was *Caméra Café*, originally French, but which gained plenty of versions around the globe. The concept of a hidden/security camera was used to depict comic situations in an office - even though most of those cameras do not capture sound, hence, they should not have dialogues.

the characters are not normally shown in overly intimate moments. If a couple were to go to the movies on a first date, for instance, and one of the characters was part of a reality show, it would be odd to have a cameraman follow them during the projection of the film and afterwards, when maybe they would go for dinner and wish to have a private conversation. This could be the reason why many contemporary mockumentary productions alternate between abiding to the mock techniques and using traditional fiction tools.

Either way, contemporary fictions have also been “contaminated” by the “reality” format, even when they are not intended to be mockumentaries. Most series released nowadays tend to stick to what is called “single-camera setup” (even if more than one camera is actually used), and that is a reference to the fact that they tend to use hand held cameras for a more natural look. Even dramatic shows such as *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011) used this device, to the point that the camera sometimes became so shaky that audiences might have gotten dizzy.

This interchange occurs both ways, since the traditional documentary format seems to have also been influenced by fictional tools of late. For example, it recently became newsworthy that there is now a trend to credit documentaries as being “written by”¹⁹. The writers would be those individuals who design the structure and

¹⁹ See *The New York Times* article by Tom Roston, *You Say True Life, I say Scripted – The Rise of Writing Credits in Documentaries*, from 24/08/2012, available on their website: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/26/movies/the-rise-of-writing-credits-in-documentaries.html? r=0>

who might write the narration voice over for such films, as directors do not always have this task. There are those who agree with this new credit, but most traditional fiction scriptwriters argue that that is nonsense, since a product based on reality does not require the same set of skills, or the same type of writing as a fictional piece. Acknowledging their work would imply that those “documentary-writers” could be granted special awards and have more leeway to fight for pay rises and other rights. The outcome of this controversy remains to be seen, but the fact that such a request has even been made is indeed very symptomatic of the “blurred” times we currently live in.

In the case of “proper” fictional films, perhaps the most popular mockumentary of recent times has been *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit of Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006). The character of Borat Sagdiyev was created by Sacha Baron Cohen for his British TV series, *Da Ali G Show* (2000-2004)²⁰, which also featured other characters, such as Austrian gay celebrity Brūno (who also inspired another mockumentary in 2009, entitled the same). The (fake) documentary depicts the trip that the Kazakh character takes to the “US and A” in order to learn about its culture. The film has been discussed by academics such as Craig

²⁰ Despite already being very well-known by British TV audiences before the movie came out, the character of Borat was also somewhat famous worldwide, as some of his videos were watched elsewhere through platforms such as YouTube. In their article *My Name Is Sacha: Fiction and fact in a New Media Era* Michael Hoehsmann and Giuliana Cucinelli state that *Borat*’s case is symptomatic of contemporary media practices, which involve narcissism, cross-platform distribution and the distrust of “reality”. Available online at: <http://www.freireproject.org/files/Taboo2007BoratIssue.pdf#page=89>

Hight (2009) and Leshu Torchin (2008). Hight observes how *Borat* manages to reveal the embedded prejudices of American culture through deceit. Torchin notes that most of the people featured in the movie did not know that the situations were being faked, and from that point of view, it can be actually considered a documentary (or a hybrid), as for those individuals, everything was real. This, to some extent, suggests an ethical issue. Was it right for Baron Cohen to fool his “characters”, so long as it was for the “greater good” of revealing their bigotry? The film has also been praised for its comic and scatological values, common characteristics of all Baron Cohen endeavors.

In some scenes, *Borat* also displays a narrative problem shared by other mock audiovisual texts: it presents a visual style that is closer to regular fictions than to documentaries. This happens for instance when the main character is left completely alone and nevertheless there seems to be an omnipresent camera that captures everything he does, even though no extra cameraman is acknowledged. This might be further evidence that the mockumentary mode does have its limitations when capturing intimate moments.

One question that arises from all of the contemporary examples is whether or not the mockumentary format will eventually be exhausted, and thus, go out of fashion. It will be interesting to see what future films and TV series can do with the format. For now, there are alternative ways of blending fact and fiction that do not necessarily resort to the mockumentary mode as we know it. *Curb*

Your Enthusiasm (2000-...) and *30 Rock* (2006-2013) are good examples of this. These two series feature characters and situations inspired by the lives of their creators (who also play the protagonists). Amongst other shared characteristics, both series make use of hand held cameras and realistic settings. Also, both series comically and recurrently use celebrities playing themselves (they are “real”, albeit acting in fictitious situations). In this sense, they are more ingenious than other series that simply try to implement the mockumentary strategy but eventually fall into the trap of narrative inconsistencies. Whichever the case, it is undeniable that the influence of mockumentaries has shaped a considerable amount of contemporary audiovisual texts.

All things considered, it is evident that the popularity of some mockumentaries demonstrates the way in which audiences have become more and more bored and suspicious of the traditional documentary format. However, it is also a symptom of how the reality TV formats have influenced contemporary fiction. It will be interesting to see where such hybridization (so to speak) will lead the universes of both fact and fiction. Perhaps they will simply merge²¹.

²¹ Craig Hight recently approached the issue of contemporary mock TV practices in his book *Television Mockumentary: Reflexivity, Satire and a Call to Play* (2010). In this work he gives a plethora of examples and concludes that now there is indeed a normalization of the usage of the mockumentary format. He also states that perhaps Reception studies would be a more accurate way to determine if audiences interpret these texts with more skepticism or simply as an audiovisual trend which mixes facts and fiction.

2.2. Mockumentary as comedy

As previously mentioned, the mockumentary mode does not always gravitate towards the comic genre. Nevertheless, most mockumentaries related to the music industry tend to have a comic feel to them. Therefore, it is worthwhile to approach them in the context of this genre.

Fake documentaries are usually considered to be parodies, either of the audiovisual texts that they draw from or of the subjects that they portray. However, as Krutnik and Neale observed (1990, pp. 19-20), parodies do not need to be comic by nature either. There is also, of course, a difference between that which is generally regarded as comic, and those texts that include humour but that do not necessarily abide by the rules of traditional comedy. In order to clarify some of those issues, Krutnik and Neale established some rules for determining and evaluating comedies. For example, they noted that classic comedy tends to rely on gags and jokes as fundamental resources, and that in many cases this implies a break in the narrative, as most of the times those do not contribute to the main plot. They are shown to have the mere purpose of provoking laughter. This implies that comedy is somewhat subversive to the rules of conventional fiction.

Consequently, there has been much discussion on whether or not comedy is subversive by nature. As previously mentioned, this discussion exists in the context of the fake documentary mode as

well. Also, as will be seen in the following chapter, music theorists frequently ask if rock and roll music is mostly subversive or conformist. It can be argued then that this commonality shared by these three genres allows them to be quite well suited to one another. That is, rock can blend well with comedy, which can blend well with mockumentaries, and the latter, to come full circle, can then blend well with rock. Whether or not they are subversive is a question whose answer probably depends on each individual text and particular audience. The key point is that rock and roll, comedy and the mockumentary format all share the following: they are genres that commonly represent a tension between subversion and conformity; and therefore, they tend to fall somewhere in between the praise and the critique of whatever they depict.

Another common technique used by comedy is to break the fourth wall, that is, to make reference in the text to the fact that it is a work of fiction. As Krutnik and Neale state:

“Direct address to camera (in the form of a look and/or comment) and references to the fiction as fiction are just two of the most obvious – and obviously transgressive – devices used very frequently in comedies to draw attention to their artifice, to highlight the rules by which it is governed and, thus, to raise laugh”. (1990, p. 90)

British comedy troupe Monty Python used this device frequently in their TV show *Flying Circus* (1969-1974) and particularly in their first feature film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). They

also used fake news reports and other documentary references as part of their sketches, something that might have inspired one of their members, Eric Idle, to use and expand upon such resources years later, when creating *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*.

Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre used breaking the fourth wall as one of his main resources as well²². Albeit drawing from elements of comedy, in this case, the aim was possibly more politically-related than simply to make the public laugh. Also, the interruption in this case called for a certain immediacy that is obviously absent in the projection of a motion picture. Having a performer break the fourth wall live, then and there, implied instigating the audience to participate, to take action, to question what they were watching. Anyhow, this provocative device can still be associated with its use in comedy films and with the mockumentary format, as transgression of traditional storytelling and of documentary methods is implied in both cases.

Breaking the fourth wall can also be related to the mockumentary mode in the sense that they are both considered to be "meta" devices. If the viewer of a mockumentary is cognizant of the fact that everything he or she is watching is fake, he/she will be aware that the text is making reference to the creative process itself, be it the creation of a work of fiction or a documentary. In more specific terms, the difference between these can perhaps be traced back to

²² For an analysis of Brecht's theatre, see Walter Benjamin's "What Is Epic Theater", in *Illuminations* (1969).

the fact that breaking the fourth wall, like gags and jokes, tends to imply a break in the narrative²³. Whereas in mockumentaries, these breaks in narrative tend not to occur, since their narrative structure differs from that of common fictions.

In mockumentaries, instead of gags and jokes, we have what Krutnik and Neale call the “comic moment”, or “comic event” (1990, pp. 44-47). These would be moments of humour that would still contribute to the content of the main plot. One example of this is when in *This Is Spinal Tap* the band decides to play experimental jazz in a concert at an amusement park. The scene is quite funny and ironic (since Spinal Tap is actually a heavy metal band), but it also contributes to the main narrative as we learn more about the group. Things were turning badly and they had become desperate, so they tried to “reinvent” themselves by playing another music style. Although irony does not always imply in humour, quite often one leads to the other. Another form of creating humour would be through hyperbole. This can be perceived for instance in *Fear of a Black Hat* in the overly exaggerated use of ammunition by the characters. Again, there is a narrative point here, to show that many rap musicians always carry weapons with them. The scenes

²³ In the case of Monty Python’s creations, the breaking of the fourth wall is done in a very sophisticated manner. In addition to stopping the narrative, this device is generally used as a dialogue between the “real” and the fictitious world. It is also used to extend the narrative, that is, they would begin a sketch, then somehow break the fourth wall, and then begin a new sketch (hence new “mini” narrative) from there on. See Krutnik and Neal (1990, pp. 196-208) and my own article “Entre o Riso e a Transgressão: uma análise de Monty Python em busca do Cálice Sagrado” (2009).

featuring guns are indeed quite funny, even though they depict a serious subject matter.

Traditional gags and jokes are rarely featured in mockumentaries, and when they do occur, they are still somehow integral to the main narrative. This happens for instance in *This Is Spinal Tap* when we see midgets dancing around the mini-model of Stonehenge. It is a visual gag, but one that contributes to the main story, as it displays the pathetic situations that the band gets into. Those differences might offer some indications about the contrasts between traditional fiction and the mockumentary mode. In fictions about rock bands, for example, the action tends to have a dramatic tone overall, interpolated at times by jokes that do not necessarily offer much to the story. In a mockumentary, because everything that is shown must be revealing, the comic moments become a part of the main narrative.

Furthermore, as discussed in the previous section, sometimes the mockumentary format proves inadequate in certain dramatic situations, as the camera cannot always follow the characters during their most intimate moments (at least not without losing some of the “spontaneity”). Thus, it can be inferred that traditional fiction is more suitable to music films that require more drama, whereas the mockumentary mode fits better with movies having a humorous appeal. As with common fictions, a three-act structure is followed, and cause and effect relations are established, but because visual

conventions borrowed from documentaries are used, the overall outcome is different.

In conclusion, most music mockumentaries can be categorized as comedies, even though they do not operate as traditional ones (i.e., they have “comic moments”, instead of featuring a lot of gags and jokes). Additionally, comedy seems quite suitable to music-related mockumentaries, since there is an affinity between those three categories. The comic genre, mockumentaries and music (mostly rock) all imply a tension between subversion and conformity. Therefore, a comic music mockumentary is a very appropriate means of depicting the conflicts that are so characteristic of them.

Lastly, a final consideration should be made regarding the popularity that comedies tend to have with audiences. Much of the appeal of music mockumentaries is precisely due to the fact that they truly are funny. In fact, this might explain in part why many of them have gained a cult status²⁴. Thus, understanding these films not only in relation to documentaries but also in the context of the comic genre is vital to their analysis.

²⁴ Ethan De Seife, in the final chapter of his book *This Is Spinal Tap* (2007) argues that one of the main reasons why it became a cult movie is precisely due to its comic qualities.

2.3. Music mockumentaries: origins and examples

Girl: Are you a mod or rocker?

Ringo: Huh... No, I'm a 'mocker'.

Dialogue extracted from *A Hard Day's Night* (1964). The line was actually replicated by Ringo in the film, as he had said it before in a TV interview.

The origins of music-related mockumentaries can be traced back to various sources. Rockumentaries are definitely the main source, but other “hybrid” texts could have been influences as well. One of the earliest music films to borrow codes from documentaries was the first Beatles movie, *A Hard Day's Night*. While the film also features a typical fictitious structure and the classical musical numbers (when the narrative simply stops in order for the audience to listen to the songs), at moments it is intended to look like a real report about the lives of the Beatles. Ultimately, those films were intended to promote the band in yet another medium, but they do say a lot about the time during which they were released and Beatlemania. As will be demonstrated later, The Beatles' movies were some of the main sources for *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*. In fact, making a mockumentary about the Beatles' story might have been rather easy, since there was so much audiovisual material available to mimic.

The Beatles' films were also a great visual inspiration for some of the series released from the 1960s onwards. *The Impossibles*, for example, was a cartoon released by Hanna-Barbera in 1966 featuring a trio of British musicians who had superpowers that they used to fight crime between gigs. Although it was an American production, the characters were Brits, as that seemed appropriate since these were the years of the British (musical) Invasion. Another example is *The Partridge Family*, released in the USA in 1970. The series featured the story of a musical family group and it lasted for four seasons. They also released "real" music albums while the series lasted, albeit only a few cast members actually played the instruments. The other actors would also appear on the album covers, even though they never actually participated in the recording sessions.

Perhaps the most impressive case of a music TV series from this time period was *The Monkees* (1966-1968). The series was initially intended as an American response to the aforementioned British Invasion, and it abided to the usual rules of fiction – it did not have a mockumentary format. It was simply created as a marketing tool, so the episodes had plots and catchy songs that later turned into singles and albums. Nonetheless, some time later the actors playing the band members decided that they wanted to take control of matters. They fought for the right to compose and perform (instead of having other musicians do it for them), and to manage their careers. Consequently, the "real" band outlived the series and gained even more popularity throughout the 1960s. It was one of

the few cases where the lines of fiction and reality blurred, as would later happen in music mockumentaries. The band also made a psychedelic film named *Head* (1968).

In 1978, two fake documentaries having a music-related theme were released. One of them was the aforesaid *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*, which will receive further analysis in the chapter devoted to case studies, as it is considered to be the primordial music documentary. The other was *Orchestra Rehearsal (Prova d'orchestra)*, a Federico Fellini film that uses documentary conventions to show an Italian orchestra going on strike against its conductor. The film is not as well-known as other Fellini creations, but is it worth watching as it features a music environment that is quite different from those presented in other music mockumentaries.

In 1983, British TV series *The Comic Strip Presents...* released a recurring skit featuring a heavy metal band named Bad News. One of the episodes, entitled *Bad News Tour*, used the mockumentary format. The creation of this fictional group paralleled the creation of *This Is Spinal Tap*, and they also gained a life outside of the fictitious sphere. They toured, releasing albums and video clips for years after their first appearances. However, Bad News never had as much cult status as Spinal Tap did, perhaps because audiences found the latter more universally appealing. Released the following year, *This Is Spinal Tap* became such an essential film in the

universe of music mockumentaries (and fake documentaries in general), that it merits an in-depth analysis in the final chapter.

Another example of a fictitious band initially featured in a movie that went on to later gain real life acclaim, is the Leningrad Cowboys. This fake Finish ensemble came to public attention in 1989, in *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*. The film is not a mockumentary, but it did become a cult favourite. The band is still active today, playing gigs, and releasing albums and videos. Besides their own material, they also play popular cover songs adding a heavy metal/hard rock touch. They are known for their somewhat soviet-garish look as well.

The opposite happened to Tenacious D. The duo, comprised of Jack Black and Kyle Glass, was formed in 1991 but only became famous when HBO released a series featuring them in 1999. *Tenacious D: The Greatest Band on Earth* (1997-2000) displayed comic and fake events of their career. After the series ended, the band managed to maintain a certain degree of popularity, releasing albums, playing concerts and appearing every now and then in works of fiction. In 2006 they released a movie, *Tenacious D in The Pick of Destiny*. Currently, Jack Black is better known as an actor/comedian than as a musician.

The 1990s saw a rise in popularity of hip-hop music, and it was in that context that two mockumentaries appeared: *Fear of a Black Hat* and *CB4* (both released in 1993). The former will also receive

further analysis in the final chapter. As for *CB4*, it was a more commercial project, including amongst its cast member Chris Rock, who was by then a fairly well-known cast member of *Saturday Night Live*. *CB4* is not as incisive as *Fear of a Black Hat*, thus, when deciding which of the two films deserved a thorough analysis, the latter was chosen.

The world of punk rock/hard core has also been depicted in a mockumentary, *Hard Core Logo* (1996). Unlike most music mock documentaries, this film has a much more dramatic tone. Based on the homonymous novel, it reveals the ups and downs of a Canadian punk band, which had already been active for quite a few years. Amongst the conflicts portrayed is the issue that the members might be getting too old for this lifestyle²⁵ and whether or not they should surrender to the conventions of mainstream music. The latter subject could indeed be conflictive for a music genre that is generally known for its political implications. Photographed mainly in black-and-white, the film's songs were later recorded by other hard core bands and released as a "tribute" to the band.

Another mockumentary to be scrutinized in more depth in this study is *A Mighty Wind* (2003). Directed by Christopher Guest and featuring quite a few of the cast members from his previous films, it merits further analysis as it is a recent example and because it features a different music genre, folk music. Despite also being

²⁵ This issue is also touched on in *This Is Spinal Tap*. In fact, the longevity of certain bands is ridiculed by some, since rock music is typically associated with youth culture and its rebellious nature.

made by Guest et al., the film stands on its own due to its peculiarities, which deserve to be discussed here.

As previously stated, in recent years there has also been a rise in the mock format in television, with musical ones being no exception. Some examples would be *2ge+her*, having both a movie and a series released in the year 2000, and *The Naked Brothers Band* (2005), a film later turned into a series (2007). Both of those were aimed at teenage audiences, and thus it may be inferred that mockumentaries expanded their audience range. In the first case, the series was intended to be a satire about boy bands, thus it could have had some sort of critical power, but it is unclear as to whether or not the audiences in fact understood it as a criticism. Currently there are other examples of mockumentaries worldwide about boy bands, such as the Norwegian-produced *Get Ready to be Boyzvoiced* (2000) and the Hong Kong-made *The Heavenly Kings* (2006).

One of the most recent examples of music mockumentaries is the web series *Spärhusen*, about an “almost famous” Swedish band from the 1970s going by the same name. Created by actress/writer Ileana Douglas, the short episodes were released between 2009 and 2010, and the band was clearly a mock version of Abba. The fact that it was released for free over the Internet (instead of being made as a movie or a TV series) is quite telling in regards to the current patterns of production and consumption. *Spärhusen* was probably not the last that the world has seen from this type of audiovisual

text, and it may be wondered what future music mockumentaries will be like. Are they going to be short or feature films? Are they going to somehow merge with reality shows? How will they be distributed? Will these new aspects have any effect on their content? What music styles will they focus on?

Obviously, the answers to these questions cannot be provided as of yet. Studying mockumentaries is a continuous process, to the extent that new things are always coming around. Perhaps they will no longer be “in fashion” in a few years’ time, and therefore it will be somewhat easier to look back at those films and series. Analyses tend to improve with time, as it is difficult to fully appreciate a phenomenon at the moment in which it is happening. As the years go by, we can reflect on what else was occurring in the past, evaluating the facts in hindsight. Focusing only on the present generally leads to quick assumptions and guessing about the potential consequences, instead of having a broader range of knowledge at hand. That is the reason why the last film (in chronological terms) that has received an in-depth analysis in this study was *A Mighty Wind*, made about 10 years ago. The case studies chapter will address this film and the other three aforementioned ones, contextualizing them not only as music mockumentaries but also as products of their time and the specific music genres that they mocked.

3. HOW MUSIC IS “SEEN”: AUDIOVISUAL CONNECTIONS AND (RE)CURRENT ISSUES

The main aim of this section is to set cinematic and musical bases for the case studies (to be found in the final chapter). Cinema and music have always had a special connection. Even during the time of silent films, movie theatres offered some background score²⁶. The execution of such music could range from merely a piano or an organ playing along with the scenes in smaller theatres, to entire orchestras for bigger screens. Obviously, with the arrival of talkies, this “audio-visual” association has changed, expanding over the decades. The first part will address this enduring relationship.

The second part approaches music as culture in broader terms. Production and consumption patterns will be discussed, as this might offer insight into some of the themes that are commonly found in music mockumentaries. This will help to clarify some past and contemporary issues regarding the music industry.

3.1. Films and music

Music has always been an integral part of cinema narratives, even during the silent era, although it certainly became increasingly more so with the rise of sound films. Besides soundtracks per se, which

²⁶ See BARRIOS, R., 1995. *A Song in the dark: the birth of the musical film*. New York: Oxford Press University. The author historically approaches the transition years between silent and sound film, as well as the era of the early musicals.

set the mood of the action²⁷, songs began to play a large role in films with the creation of musicals. They firstly initially were adapted from the stage musical format, but within over the years, cinematic musicals have developed their own characteristics. *The Jazz Singer* (1927) is widely known as the very first sound film ever made, though as Richard Barrios explains (1995, pp. 13-40), this was not actually exactly the case. Nevertheless, this motion picture included quite a few groundbreaking properties, such as trying to transfer the universe of vaudeville to the big screen. Its star, Al Jonson, was already a famous Broadway performer, and the film was an adaptation of a musical stage play based on real events from his own life. Therefore, a connection can be established between the early musicals and the music mockumentaries that would develop decades later. The early music biopics may be considered a studio system method of creating narratives of facts that were “inspired by the real life” of famous musicians. Other examples of this were *Night and Day* (1946), based on the life of Cole Porter²⁸ and *The Glenn Miller Story* (1954).

The musical genre evolved somewhat slowly. As Barrios explains, the years between 1928 and 1935 were crucial to establishing standards, so that Hollywood musicals would be more than recorded versions of Broadway shows. *42nd Street* (1933) is

²⁷ This occurs even on a seemingly unconscious level, with many soundtracks managing to have that “barely there” effect. That is, they are so effective at mixing melodies with the scenes that the public might actually forget that they are listening to something.

²⁸ Cole Porter’s life became another biopic in 2004, named *De-Lovely*, which featured a much more thorough and realistic account of his life.

considered to be the first movie to actually set narrative patterns, followed subsequently by others. One of the peculiarities of the film is that it acknowledged the issue of the deep economic crisis that had begun by 1929. This crisis, in fact, also had an impact on film production and consumption. The year of 1933 also brought to light the first film ever to feature the dancing duo of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, *Flying Down to Rio* (1933). They would act together again in nine other motion pictures, becoming one of the most iconic Hollywood pairings ever. After they “broke up”, Astaire carried on his solo dancing/acting career over the span of three more decades. Astaire’s fame demonstrates the fact that Hollywood musicals were constantly bound not only to the vocal performances of their leading characters but also to their dancing skills.

Later in the 1930s, with the USA’s recovery from the crisis and the development of Technicolor, musicals gained other characteristics. Perhaps the most representative example from this period is *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). This film is not only known for its use of bold colours but also for turning Judy Garland into a star. Both Barrios and Jane Feuer²⁹ write about the importance that colour would play on musicals from this point forward. Indeed, Hollywood then began to have easier access to more “realistic”³⁰ audiovisual resources,

²⁹ See FEUER, J., 1993. *The Hollywood Musical* (2nd ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³⁰ Brian Winston discusses the fake and ideological notion that Technicolor meant more realism in his 1996 book *Technologies of seeing: photography, cinema and television*.

with big productions in colour becoming a must. Black-and-white became the solution to small budget projects or a choice only when a specific aesthetic feel was trying to be achieved. Other examples of this in the 1940s and 1950s are *Cover Girl* (1944), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *On the Town* (1949) and *An American in Paris* (1951).

Jane Feuer establishes some commonalities shared by films of this so-called classic musical era. Amongst those that she points out were: the aforementioned use of colour; the use of direct address to the camera as a way of celebrating entertainment and acknowledging the audience (rather than causing estrangement); and, the portrayal of “backstage” life. In fact, many musicals discuss the production of a musical play or film. Music mockumentaries may also be associated with this self-reflexivity trait. One of the most well-known musicals ever made was *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), a movie that talks about the transition period from silent movies to talkies. More specifically, *Singin’ in the Rain* can be considered a meta-film, as it shows what happens in the backstage of the production of a fictional musical. The film’s imagery and songs remain some of the most famous in cinematic history. Another example from the 1950s having these same “meta” properties was *A Star is Born* (1954), featuring Judy Garland as a fictional performer rising to fame.

Another trait discussed by Feuer is the appreciation of popular music (rather than classical music). It was indeed very typical that

the musical soundtracks would become very popular, that is, that their records would become best sellers and their tunes would be played often on the radio. In that sense, the 1940s and early 1950s were indeed the height of the musicals, but this began to change by the late 50s and 1960s in particular. A significant shift occurred in the popular music scenario: the rise of rock and roll. Suddenly, youth became a major consumption group and they were more interested in watching a Elvis Presley's film than a traditional musical with Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly. Some years later, the same happened with The Beatles movies. The films that worked as star vehicles for singers/bands, such as Elvis's *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), functioned in many ways similarly to classic musicals: they had a main narrative that should be followed, but the story was intertwined by musical performances. The big difference was the content, as Elvis songs and moves were quite different from the usual upbeat jazz and tap dancing found in the old-fashioned musicals.

There were still a few popular musicals made in the 1960s, including *West Side Story* (1961), *My Fair Lady* (1964) and the two movies that turned Julie Andrews into a cinema star: *Mary Poppins* (1964) and *The Sound of Music* (1965). Aspects of this transition period may be seen in the 1960s films, especially in this latter example. Despite featuring most of the characteristics of classic musicals, such as the use of diegetic songs and dances, *The Sound of Music* also conveyed a sense of realism that was seemingly absent in prior musicals. The film was inspired by a stage musical,

which was inspired by another (German) film, which in turn was inspired by a book based on real life events. The film was shot in location settings, and this outdoors factor should not be underestimated, as traditional musicals were typically filmed in studios. This may have resulted from the use of lighter cameras – a technological advanced from the late 1950s that had many implications, including the aforementioned development of direct cinema (or, as the French would call it, *cinéma vérité*).

The late 1950s also saw a rise in concert films, musical documentaries that eventually evolved into the rockumentaries of the 1960s onwards. One of these “transitional” movies was *Jazz on a Summer’s Day* (1959), which in terms of visual style was very similar to rockumentaries: the action is captured by hand held cameras and a sensation of realism is transmitted. The film was indeed influenced by the rise of direct cinema, and it shows not only the performances but also the audience’s reactions and other details of what else was going on at the outdoors venue and its surroundings. This style fits the description of what is now called “fly-on-the-wall” techniques. Similar methods were used years later, in films such as *Woodstock* (1970), which registered the enduring images of the famous festival, and *Gimme Shelter* (1970), about The Rolling Stones 1969 tour and their fateful concert in Altamont. The gig ended up with the murder (actually registered on camera, from afar) of a young fan. The Hell’s Angels had been hired to take care of security, but their methods ended up in violence. *Gimme Shelter* captures the darker side of those

psychedelic years. The audience shots display tension and the fact that much of the public seemed to be numb – possibly because many of them were having “bad trips”.



Figure 3: An astonished Mick Jagger watches the concert footage in *Gimme Shelter*.

It is worth mentioning at this point that The Rolling Stones are possibly the band that has had the most documentaries made about them of all time. These films include Godard’s experimentations in *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968), which amongst other “epiphanies” features images of band member Brian Jones being ostracized. Jones was eventually kicked out of the band and died a few months later under mysterious circumstances, and his final days were also the main source of a traditional narrative movie, *Stoned* (2005). Another documentary about them that was deemed so explicit that it was ultimately banned was *Cocksucker Blues* (1972). This film featured their US tour to promote their album *Exile on Main Street*

and allegedly shows (amongst other “indecorous” scenes) the band members shooting themselves up with heroin.

The aforementioned documentaries about The Rolling Stones are perhaps the most experimental ones, but the band has also used the documentary format for commercial purposes, such as the recent and laudatory *Crossfire Hurricane* (2012), which not only came out in celebration of their 50th anniversary, but also was used to promote their latest (albeit short) tour and new album. Quite a few other artists have resorted to similar techniques. A good example of this was *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991), which followed the pop star on one of her tours and displayed many “polemic” scenes. Eventually, the film helped Madonna to receive even more public attention and reinforce her image as a daring performer. Perhaps the same can be said about the hoax *I’m Still Here* (2010), where actor Joaquin Phoenix “pretends” he wants to become a rap star. It was a good way for him to revamp his career, as eventually he did not in fact become a rapper but managed to maintain himself in the spotlight. He went so far as to be interviewed on real life talk shows declaring his new (and fake) musical career path.

As for rockumentaries about other bands, perhaps the most influential one ever made was *The Last Waltz* (1978), which shows the last concert (or so they thought) given by The Band. It intercalates interviews and performances, and is shot in the typical direct cinema style. Directed by Martin Scorsese, the film was the inspiration for mockumentaries about music like *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Scorsese later would repeat the experience of directing music-related documentaries, with films such as *Shine a Light* (released in 2008, which also captures a Rolling Stones concert) and *George Harrison: Living in the Material World* (2011), about the life of the “quiet” Beatle.

Another example is the Talking Heads’ concert film *Stop Making Sense* (1984). Directed by Jonathan Demme, the movie explores performances and settings in a more creative way than do the typical rockumentaries. As Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton point out, “*Stop Making Sense* accrued a reputation not merely as a Talking Heads concert film, but because of the imaginative stage designs and choreographed routines that set it apart from “routine” concert films”³¹.

Today rockumentaries have reached a fair level of popularity, and quite a few bands have had documentaries made about themselves. A good example of this is the rockumentary *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (2004), which shows the personal and power conflicts occurring between members of this famous heavy metal band. Interestingly enough, it can now be said that these films have actually been influenced by music mockumentaries. An amusing case is *Anvil! The Story of Anvil* (2008), portraying the Canadian heavy metal band and clearly having been influenced by *Spinal Tap*. The film is shot in a manner that allows the audience to

³¹ In: MATHIJS, E., and SEXTON, J., 2011. *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, p. 172.

imagine that a significant part of what is shown may well have been staged. Whatever the case may be, *Anvil!* is quite effective at depicting the life of what was once a wannabe heavy metal band, which instead fell into mediocrity, though still willing to rock.

Rockumentaries are not, however, the only means that rock and roll has used to get involved with cinema. There have even been some attempts to mix it with musicals, with the so-called rock opera genre, that amongst its examples includes films like *Tommy* (1975), created by The Who. By the 1970s, musicals were visibly decadent, and the few successful ones were precisely these rock operas or adaptations of previously made stage shows (which at times were themselves adaptations of rock operas). This was the case with, for example, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Hair* (1979) and *Grease* (1978). The latter was one of last musicals to achieve popularity. Its songs had been influenced by rock and it was also an adaptation of a Broadway show. Musical are still made today, but they rarely achieve the same level of popularity that they used to enjoy. One possible exception to this is *Across the Universe* (2007), a cult favourite that features many Beatles' songs. Musical have also managed to somehow survive on their stage versions, in Bollywood cinema, and (it can be argued) even in the contemporary phenomena of flash mobs.

It is true that the artistic melting pot of the 1960s and 1970s brought significant changes to the relation of music vs. cinema. As Howard Hampton states (2004), those were the years when music previously

written by singers and bands started to become part of the filmic narratives. Before that, songs were typically composed especially for the films, using the typical “watch the film, enjoy the songs, then buy the soundtrack” marketing technique. The impact of this was considerable because it implied a change for the music industry as well, as now the rights of use were being bought with that purpose too. As for audiences, this contributed to an increasing sense of cinematic realism: the songs that people were listening to on the radio or on records could then suddenly become part of a film. A famous example of this is the case of *Easy Rider* (1969). Steppenwolf’s *Born to Be Wild* was not composed for the movie, but it became much more known after being used in it. Now, whenever someone listens to it, the movie comes to mind, and vice-versa: whenever we think about the movie, the song seems to immediately come into our heads.

The same songs/images association occurs with the soundtrack of *The Graduate* (1967). The songs composed and performed by the duo Simon and Garfunkel (especially for the film) are deeply conjoint with its imagery. Scorsese has played a large role in this shift as well, as he often uses rock songs as part of his stories. One example of this is in *Mean Streets* (1973). Referring to this film, Howard Hampton writes that it “is the most seductive union of movies and rock imaginable: a prowling, claustrophobic fever dream where the images and music are locked in a interpenetrating embrace, each intensifying, elaborating, and undermining the meanings of the other” (2004, p. 249). This usage of previously

recorded songs as part of the narratives really did manage to alter the connection between music and cinema at its very core.

The 1980s, 1990s and recent years combined all of these influences to create different types of films. The most significant change, however, might be the rise of films whose main subject is music but that do not fit exactly into the profile of musicals, or of rockumentaries or mockumentaries. These are films that might be either dramas or comedies, and they can talk about specific times in music history, about bands or simply be greatly influenced by songs. Jane Feuer discusses this type of “new musical” in a chapter added to the second edition of her book, *The Hollywood Musical* (1993). She states that teen films such as *Footloose* (1984) and *Dirty Dancing* (1987) are good examples of this shift. Unlike musicals, they make use of extra-diegetic music to include dancing performances, but they still use diegetic songs in significant parts of the narrative. Even more recent examples of this include TV products *High School Musical* (2006) and *Glee* (2009-...). Feuer also writes that one of the main characteristics of those movies is that romantic aspirations are usually restored, as they were in classic musicals as well. There are however, some important exceptions. One that she mentions is *Rock ‘n’ Roll High School* (1979), featuring punk rock band The Ramones (their songs and their presence). In this film there are no romantic ideals, and the teenagers eventually blow up the school, implying that music may have more subversive effects.

There are plenty of other examples of more unconventional use of music in recent cinema, sometimes blurring the lines between fact and fiction, without necessarily turning such movies into mockumentaries. *Crossroads* (1986), for example, is based on real life events and features real musicians, but it takes a lot of poetic licenses to talk about the blues, such as featuring the devil as a character. *The Commitments* (1991) features some characteristics of mockumentaries in order to tell the story of the creation of a soul band in Dublin. The film and its soundtrack became cult favourites, and it is regarded as an insightful mix of drama and comedy about a group of people who find great pleasure in playing music. In *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), Abba's music is used in a very different way than it would be later in *Mamma Mia!* (2008). While the latter film sticks to the rules of traditional musicals, the former shows how much emotional impact the songs from the Swedish band have on the life events and personality of the leading character.

Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) portrays the world of glam rock in the 1970s through a nonlinear narrative that has a journalist investigating the disappearance of one of the main stars from that era, who had faked his own death on stage. The film has a structure that is very similar to that of *Citizen Kane*, and as in Welles' masterpiece, many of its characters were based on real life individuals, such as David Bowie and Iggy Pop, and events that they had lived. Haynes later created *I'm Not There* (2007), based on the life of Bob Dylan. He used six different performers (including a woman, Cate Blanchett), to represent different fragments of Dylan's

personality and life in an intertwined narrative. Another biographical example is *Almost Famous* (2000), directed by Cameron Crowe and based on his own experiences as a teenage rock aficionado who eventually manages to go on a tour with a rising band and to write for Rolling Stone magazine. All of these last three examples abide to traditional fictional rules, therefore it is hard to imagine how they would have looked if they had been made as rockumentaries (since they were based on real life situations) or as mockumentaries. The directors clearly made a choice in terms of storytelling, selecting what they thought would be more convenient for the visual style that they wished to convey.

Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* (2002) and *9 Songs* (2004) also interchange facts and fiction. The first film tells the tale of the creation of Factory Records in Manchester in the late 1970s, as well as the story of the bands that were signed under the label, and the creation of the Hacienda nightclub. The movie used some real life footage and it looks like a mockumentary in some parts, but it sticks mainly to the traditional rules of fiction. As for *9 songs*, it basically tells the story of a couple as they are going to (real) concerts and having sex. The film was considered very polemic due to its realism in using explicit sex scenes. Another example of fiction getting mixed with fact is *Once* (2006). This Irish production features a duo of musicians that get romantically involved while composing music. In real life, the actors/players (Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová) also ended up having a relationship.

Music is still essential to these films, as it is in different kinds of stories, such as *School of Rock* (2003), where a frustrated musician pretends that he is a teacher and manages to assemble a talented rock band with his students, who are in their early teens. Interestingly enough, these films could also be considered musicals to some extent, since they include quite a few musical performances³². Just as the 1980s teen musicals incorporated extra-diegetic and diegetic music in a way that is different than old school musicals, in these latest examples, the singing and dancing from the classic musicals is substituted by concert performances. This might be a more contemporary and realistic way to visually approach music, since nowadays audiences are more familiar with the concert culture as opposed to the stage acts from music halls/vaudeville that inspired the early musicals.

As for the differences in terms of narrative between those types of film and mockumentaries, there is one example which can be very elucidative: *The Wonders - That Thing You Do!* (1996), about a 1960s American band that manages to produce a hit song, but due to conflicts of interests amongst its band members and other circumstances, it never goes beyond that. The band members are portrayed mostly as naive when facing the harshness of the music industry. The main song, with the same title as that of the film, was a real life hit. It used to be played on radios worldwide, on MTV,

³² Ethan De Seife writes a section in his book *This Is Spinal Tap* in which he compares the timing and the length in which performances occur in the movie to other standard musicals. The conclusion is that the mockumentary's performances have a similar "rhythm" to musical numbers. See DE SEIFE, E., 2007. *This Is Spinal Tap*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, pp. 54-60.

sold out the movie's soundtrack and was even nominated for the Oscars. However, the fictional band never went on tour and never performed live. One of the obvious reasons is because the actors were not actually musicians, but another might be simply due to it being a "normal" film, where the limits between fact and fiction are better defined. The audience could watch the film, buy the record, listen to the song repeatedly, but there would be no blurry lines in the experience, as was the case with *Spinal Tap*. The 1990s were very different than the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, when fictional bands such as The Monkees and The Partridge Family pushed the borders, mainly because they had a somewhat gullible public.

The situations portrayed in *The Wonders* would probably have not worked (or would have worked differently) if it had been shot in a mockumentary style. Shooting films such as *Velvet Goldmine*, *Almost Famous* and *The Wonders* in a traditional manner allows them to be easily interpreted by audiences. The mockumentary mode can be more challenging, as it seems to question not only what it is being portrayed but also how it is being portrayed. Hence, the decision of whether to film one music-related movie in a traditional form or as a fake documentary depends vastly upon the message that is trying to be conveyed. The case studies discussed in the following chapter will be more elucidating in regards to this issue, and examples of differences between narrative styles will be provided. It is to be wondered what the future holds for the relationship between music and cinema. Hybrid formats? Will they feature even more multimedia assets, considering the influence of

technology and the Internet? Whatever the case may be, music will certainly continue to play a very significant role in cinema.

It should also be remarked that traditional genre theories seem unable to encompass the idiosyncrasies of exceptional texts. As Jane Feuer writes: “If we define genre as systematic intertextuality then film genre study has put the emphasis on systematicity and regularity at the expense of other possible more randomized, more fragmentary forms of intertextuality that have yet to be described” (1993, p. 124). It seems that recent musical films and mockumentaries reinforce this statement. While these movies can certainly be catalogued and appreciated through their historical and cultural context, trying to fit them into categories could prove rather limiting. The advantage of music mockumentaries is that they combine conventions from both traditional fiction and documentary texts in order to create something different. Also, as previously established, mockumentaries cannot be described as a film genre, but rather, as an audiovisual strategy, as a format. Therefore, researching music mockumentaries means trying to learn more about one of those fragmentary and randomized forms of intertextuality that Feuer mentions.

3.2. Music as culture: from production to consumption

Music is one of the main manifestations of the culture industry. As such, there are plenty of different theoretical frameworks with which it can be addressed. One that has special consonance with this research is the work of British sociologist Simon Frith. He dedicated his academic life to studying popular music through a cultural perspective. His writings comprise a vast array of topics, from performance to copyright, or about different genres and ways to determine music quality.

Moreover, Frith has written eminently about rock. His first prominent work was *The Sociology of Rock* (1978). His next book, *Sound Effects: youth, leisure, and the politics of rock* (1983), was a then-updated version of the first. The main difference between them is that the latter takes into account the Punk Rock phenomena, which indeed has had a great impact on the music industry. In both works he scrutinizes rock and roll through broad lenses: its historical origins, its place in the context of mass culture and ideology, aspects of the music industry (production, distribution, marketing, press and consumption), and its relation to sexuality and leisure.

Historically, rock has been identified with the rebellious nature of youth culture, but there is obviously much more to it. Rock is especially significant for this research, as it is the music genre

depicted by two of the films featured in the case studies: *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash* and *This is Spinal Tap*. *The Rutles* deals very specifically with The Beatles and *Spinal Tap* with the universe of heavy metal (even though in the film it is indicated that the band had “experimented” with different subgenres through the years, such as psychedelic rock). The other two cases deal with hip-hop (*Fear of a Black Hat*) and folk music (a genre which is a “cousin” of rock, so to speak), but still much of what Frith discusses may also resonate with other genres, from pop to rap, or blues/jazz and world music. Nonetheless, focusing on rock allowed him to analyse a genre that is full of tensions and contradictions, confined somehow between conformity and subversion, as is the mockumentary mode.

This can be noticed even from its beginnings: rock and roll began as a blend of “black” (rhythm and blues) and “white” (country) music styles. It also arose along with certain technological advances, such as the emergence of the electric basses and guitars. The genre also benefited from circumstances very peculiar to the twentieth century, such as the development of the record industry, the popularity of radio and television, not to mention cinema itself. Current audiences might think that we are now living in times of great technological shifts (which indeed we are), but looking back at the history of popular music, it can be seen that these changes have been happening continuously and that the power of the music industry is deeply rooted, even if it might be shaken at times by crises. For every new technology that manages to facilitate the

access to music, a new rule is established, new limitations are imposed, and new ways to make a profit are discovered.

As Frith notes: “The ‘music industry’ includes a complex network of right-owners and licensed users, a continual flow of rights income which seems inexhaustible and sometimes, quite random” (*Music and the Media*, 2004, p. 176). He demonstrates how copyright laws have been adjusted through the years and comes to the conclusion that “the system only works because people – regardless of copyright – want to make music, listen to music and share musical experiences. These days it seems clear to me that if musical cultures still flourish it is despite of copyright not because of it”. (*Ibid.*, p.185). As an example of this, he discusses how the evolution of the relationship between rock and cinema affected copyright over time (*Ibid.*, p. 175), especially in the 1970s, with the rise of pre-recorded songs in films (as was previously mentioned in the prior section). He also states that our current times of music downloading and online streaming are actually leading to even more legal restrictions. He says that nowadays, the industry is aiming to not only get paid for the usage of music but that it also intends to control such usage.

Let us consider, for instance, the evolution of cases such as Napster, MySpace, Spotify or YouTube, virtual instances that were initially used simply to share media. At the beginning, the industry’s aim was to banish all software/applications/sites where music could be “gotten” for free. Eventually, they found ways to profit from this as

well. For example, iTunes emerged as a possibility (and a monopoly) of storing and paying fees for downloading anything. Spotify, which was initially conceived as an on online jukebox, now includes an increasing number of adverts, and in order to have full (and publicity-free) access to it, a fee must be paid. MySpace lost importance to other social networks like Twitter and Facebook, which combine marketing/public relations' functions with the possibility of multimedia content, always with the approval from the record labels. YouTube, with all of its originally apparently infinite audiovisual possibilities, currently seems to have more ads than any regular TV channel. YouTube also took over MTV's place on music video clips exhibition, and now it no longer matters if a video reaches the weekly top ten list of music channels: what matters is the amount of its online views. In fact, nowadays MTV might be more known for its reality shows than for its musical content. It is true that reality television was part of their programming even before the "genre" was in fashion, since they have been airing shows like *The Real World* since 1992, but now there seems to be just too much reality and too little music.

MTV's case is rather illustrative of the shifts occurring in the music industry. Upon its creation, in 1981, there was a lot of wondering if it could really work as a business model, but soon it did, turning into somewhat of a television substitute for the radio. As a matter of fact, in a way MTV brought even more profits to an industry that was facing a moment of crisis. It is worth mentioning that the 1980s were the height of pop music as we now know it, and artists like

Madonna and Michael Jackson benefited immensely from this then new medium. Frith mentions how from the 1970s onwards, artists began to have more control over what they produced, and videos were yet another way of establishing their power. Along with music press, MTV became one of the greatest gatekeepers of what was “cool”, of what youngsters should be listening to. Almost instantly, local versions of the channel were created worldwide. This helped to spread even more songs performed in English, leading MTV to be accused of being yet another means of American cultural domination taking over local traditions.

Videos also became another means of performance. Frith understands performance not only in terms of music concerts, but also in a broader sense. A recorded song, for instance, is an official performance of the song concept (lyrics and composed melody), the one that lingers in audiences’ minds, since not everyone is able to attend concerts. In fact, there are plenty of debates over which bands are better live or in the studio, or if a singer can or cannot perform live (if he/she relies on some playback device). Performance can also be understood as the ultimate form of artistic expression, as its lifestyle and craft are displayed for the public, sometimes for shock value. In that sense, videos took over the place of live performances and became an essential tool for self-promotion. They also took over the place of music films, such as those that Elvis and The Beatles used to make. Another noteworthy aspect is that before pre-fabricated videos, musicians had their live performances recorded, and later these were taken over by music

channels (via licensing from record labels) as the official song clips. These “vintage” performance videos are used in mockumentaries like *The Rutles*, *This Is Spinal Tap* and *A Mighty Wind*. In the case of the MTV-era videos, they are extensively used in *Fear of a Black Hat*, and this theme will be discussed even further in its case study.

In visual terms, there has been much debate over whether music video clips were revolutionary or not, and they were initially regarded as the ultimate postmodern medium. The argument is that music videos are constantly mixing references and media. Many cinema critics, especially those from magazines such as *Screen*, seemed to have the wrong idea about them, because as Frith puts it, they somehow ignored precisely the musical aspects of it:

“But the treatment of videos as purely visual texts is also an effect of the current orthodoxy of *Screen* theory in film and cultural studies departments. The legacy of *Screen*’s 1970s mix of psychoanalysis and linguistics is a politics of culture in which anything that disrupts narrative ‘coherence’ can be interpreted as radical, but what *Screen* theory mostly ignored was the place of music in its scenarios” (1988, p. 207).

Frith then frames videos as yet another commercial device related to music performance. To him, they were another way in which the industry stifled the original creativity and spontaneity of music. In fact, video clips do create imagery for songs, which then become forever attached to these visual constructs. It can be argued that before they existed, audiences were freer to “imagine” the music.

People could associate the lyrics and melodies to whatever they wanted without any pre-fabricated representations.

It is true then that the comparisons between music videos and live performances are limited. The latter represent the moments when the musicians' bohemian lifestyle is displayed at its best, amongst other reasons, because there is a sense of communion between performers and the audience. The audience is offered a glimpse of what it is like to live on the road, to have a hedonistic lifestyle, and to have that feeling that "they are real and so close to me" with their idols, even if they are aging and might not precisely represent youthful expectations anymore: "Rock is music made to celebrate being young and musicians are always aware, even when their audiences are not, that they are growing older, gig by gig, that these moments are the only ones left that still justify their obsessions" (Frith, 1983, p. 83). The issue of growing old but living on as a performer is approached in some music mockumentaries, in particular in *This Is Spinal Tap* and *A Mighty Wind*.

Additionally, when compared to other performing arts, music more frequently offers a sense of "realness": for example, when movie stars release a new film they do not tend to travel to many places to promote it, and even when they do, not many people manage to see them passing by. Nor would the actors be performing live, along with the film's exhibition. With theatre and dance, on the other hand, the possibility of contact does exist, but given the fact that

very few plays and shows tour, again, the range is quite limited in comparison to music tours.

These are some of the reasons why music (and more specifically rock) manages to have such an impact on youth, and why youngsters will always find a way to enjoy it. Frith quotes Tony Wilson, co-founder of Factory Records: “In times of recession, the only people who will buy records are kids to whom music means more than money” (*Ibid.*, p. 157). In current times, with both legal and illegal options, this is still true. In fact, the history of rock in a way is the history of the tension between rebelliousness and means to contain it. As Frith puts it: “Rock ‘n’ roll, then, expresses in its own way (using contrasting class experiences of youth and leisure) the contradictions of capitalist culture, the problems that arise when dreams are packaged and fantasies are sold” (*Ibid.*, pp. 269-270).

An example of this is when a band becomes famous and the inevitable question of whether or not they are “selling out” arises. Authenticity is highly valued, but that should not be an problem, because, as Frith puts it, “Rock is a mass produced music that carries a critique of its own means of production; it is a mass-consumed music that constructs its own “authentic” audience” (*Ibid.*, p. 11), and that it “is a musical means, not a musical end” (*Ibid.*, p. 14). From that it can be inferred that rock and roll per se is not revolutionary, but contains in itself contradictions and the desire for transformation. Frith concludes that each individual can attribute their own values to what he/she is listening to, since

“Capital may or may not keep control of rock’s use, but it cannot determine its meanings” (*Ibid.*, p. 271). And that eventually “the issue is not how to live outside capitalism (...), but how to live within it” (*Ibid.*, p. 272).

Frith also notices that rock stars live this contradiction on a daily basis: while they embrace bohemian values such as living a life of excesses with very few rules, they also, on the other hand, live with the benefits of the bourgeoisie. They have money, property, the ability to travel to luxury destinations, and if they have become famous then that tends to imply that they have played by the canons of the music industry. Indeed, that is a lifestyle that many rock fans would also like to live by, even though they know that only a few people reach this goal. Punk rock was (at least in its origins), an exception³³. Much of its music was truly produced under a “do-it-yourself” philosophy, following working class values. Obvious evidence of its impact is that plenty of independent record labels were created between 1977 and 1983. It is true that eventually the Punk effects faded out as they were somewhat absorbed by the market³⁴, but their ideals somehow manage to remain. This can be seen in the way in which some musicians manage their careers, looking for alternative means of production and distribution.

Frith also points out the issue of rock vs. sexuality. He notices that the sexual freedom that came with the rising popularity of rock did

³³ See Frith’s discussion of the impact of Punk rock (1983, pp. 155-163; 266-267).

³⁴ The case of Grunge in the late 1980s, early 1990s, was quite similar.

not necessarily imply increased gender equality³⁵. In fact, in many senses, it had the opposite effect. This issue has also been approached in a number of music films, including the mockumentaries featured in this research. According to Frith, women tend to be seen as mere sexual objects by many musicians, rather than friends or creative partners. This might explain why even nowadays there are few female rock stars. Women are typically viewed as groupies and nuisances in the world of rock and roll.

As previously mentioned, most of these characteristics may be applied to other music genres as well, as the tension between audience/consumer expectations and the intentions of the music industry do not seem to change much from one style to another. Perhaps rock is traditionally identified as a more revolutionary genre because it expresses the desire for freedom and youth/social dissatisfactions in a very direct way. Whatever the case may be, as indicated above, a music genre in itself is usually incapable of making profound changes in society. Music can, however, work on a personal level, which is also something to be valued. It was also aforementioned that the contradictions found in music (and its industry) in terms of production and consumption can be considered parallel to those of the mockumentary discourse. This similarity will be further explored in the case studies to follow.

³⁵ See 1983, pp. 85-87; 240-243.

4. CASE STUDIES

In the universe of mockumentaries related to the music industry, there are four motion pictures that hold special relevance for the purposes of this research. These are, in chronological order of release: *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Fear of a Black Hat* and *A Mighty Wind*.

The Rutles might be considered one of the first films to approach a music related theme using the fake documentary format. It is essential to the analysis, not only because of this, but also because it portrays (in its own way) one of the biggest musical phenomena ever: The Beatles. Moreover, the movie unfolds mainly in an expository mode, a feature that sets it apart from most of the other musical mockumentaries, which tend to adhere to an observational mode.

As for *This Is Spinal Tap*, it is considered to be the “ultimate” mockumentary, especially in what concerns the music industry³⁶. Its influence can be seen in many other mock documentaries that were created after it, even in those unrelated to musical themes. In fact, its legacy extends beyond the cinematic sphere, amongst other reasons, because the fake band seemingly built a career for itself in “real life”. Therefore, its analysis is essential to any study conducted about mockumentaries.

³⁶ This is stated by a number of works in the field of mockumentaries, most of which are referenced in this research. See for example Ethan De Seife’s book *This Is Spinal Tap* (2007).

Fear of a Black Hat depicts the universe of hip-hop/rap like no other film does. Twenty years after its release, much of what is shown in the movie still relates to what currently occurs in this musical niche market today. As will be described later, the structure of the film is not very original, but its importance lies in the representation of this music genre.

Of the four films, *A Mighty Wind* was the last to be released. Produced about ten years ago, mainly by the same creators of *This is Spinal Tap*, it is significant as it depicts yet another genre, folk music. Moreover, in terms of its structure, it presents some differences when compared to the other films, thus making it relevant to this study.

These four films, with their similarities and differences, should be sufficient for the analysis. Bearing in mind that the aim is to offer a thorough view of the relationship between mockumentaries and the music industry, but not to scrutinize every single film ever made around the topic, the selected films may be considered adequate. They contain sufficient peculiarities to make them significant as standalone works, but they are also representative of this “genre” in more general terms.

4.1. *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash*

The Beatles are probably the biggest musical phenomena of the twentieth century. It is a well-known fact that John Lennon himself once said that they were more popular than Jesus Christ. This controversial statement gave the group a lot of bad press, but it was probably true at the time. It is impossible, for instance, to disassociate the 1960s pop culture from their music. Beyond the music, they also made themselves famous for their movies and merchandising, personal lives, fashion style and social activism (the latter mostly thanks to John). Always in the spotlight, even after they separated in 1970, the band was always an easy target for parodies.

In 1975, Eric Idle, a member of the famed Monty Python comic group, released his first TV project after the end of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, a show called *Rutland Weekend Television*, for the BBC2. Along with Neil Innes (who had also collaborated on some of the Python work), he created a band mocking the Beatles called the Rutles, which was featured in many of the show's skits. The name of the band seemed rather appropriate, not only for being related to the name of the show itself, but also for the meaning of rut (boring). This is not to say that the Beatles were boring per se, but the excessive media attention that they received certainly was. Some years later, Idle and Innes got together with Lorne Michaels, creator of the then recent sensation and now classic sketch comedy TV show, *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), and decided to make a

mockumentary about the fake band. Released for television only in 1978, *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* was directed by Idle and Gary Weis, who worked at SNL. The movie received very low ratings from its first broadcast (released by the American channel NBC). However, it received much praise from British audiences when broadcasted by the BBC2 one week later. Regardless, the movie gained cult status as the years went by and today it is considered not only a reference for understanding Beatlemania but also the first mockumentary that dealt with the music industry, always being mentioned in research related to mock texts³⁷.

Being a TV product, the movie did not receive much attention from film critics at the time of its release. Nonetheless, as years went by, its cult status eventually grew, and it became the object of scrutiny of both journalists and academics. In 1991, for instance, John R. Covach wrote an article about the similarities between the lyrics and melodies of the Beatles songs and the Rutles ones, even including scores of both for comparison purposes³⁸. The similarities are remarkable, and he notes that at some points, the songs were officially credited not only to Neil Innes (who had written all of the Rutles music) but also to Lennon and McCartney, possibly to avoid charges of plagiarism³⁹. This is one of the indicators that the target of mockery is only the Beatles and no other group.

³⁷ Hight and Roscoe (2001), and Hispano and Sánchez-Navarro (2001) are amongst those who have depicted the movie.

³⁸ COVACH, J.R., 1990. *The Rutles and the Use of Specific Models in Musical Satire*. In: *Indiana Theory Review*, vol. 11, pp. 119-144. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Whenever it had a new release, either as a VHS, LD or DVD and Blu-ray in the latest years, the film received new reviews. Nathan Rabin, from *The A.V. Club*, an entertainment newspaper and website that is part of the infamous satirical news organization *The Onion*, noted in a 2002 review about the movie (for a new DVD edition that was being released) that “*The Rutles* wasn’t the first mockumentary (*David Holzman's Diary* preceded it by a decade), but it makes satirical use of documentary conventions like few films before or since, generating huge laughs from matters as mundane as camera placement, editing, and the comic intrusiveness of Idle's narrator”⁴⁰. This comment presents the film not only as a mere parody of the Beatles but also as a critique of documentaries.

The Rutles is formatted as an expository documentary, featuring scenes from the band’s past, and testimonials from individuals such as Mick Jagger and others who had somehow been involved with them. As mentioned earlier, the featured songs shamelessly resemble the original ones from the Beatles. “Get Up And Go”, for instance, is obviously a version of “Get Back”. The action begins with the narrator/reporter stating that the Rutles were “a legend that will live long after lots of other living legends have died”. Black-and-white images of shouting girls are shown to represent the height and the madness of “Rutlemania” and to give some sort of “past” quality to what is seen. We are then introduced to Dirk

⁴⁰ The article is available online at:
<http://www.avclub.com/articles/the-rutles-all-you-need-is-cash,17696/>

McQuickly (played by Idle, representing Paul McCartney), Ron Nasty (the fake John Lennon, played by Neil Innes), Stig O'Hara (Ricky Fataar, the film's version of George Harrison) and Barry Wom (John Halsey, as an extremely short parody of Ringo Starr) coming out of a plane and running away from the fans.

The title "The Rutles in All You Need Is Cash" is very telling of the fact that the Beatles made a lot of money, and is an obvious reference to "All You Need Is Love". Comedies are known for their exaggeration of facts in order to produce laughs and, in many cases, to stimulate reflection. Possibly the title *All You Need Is Cash* was intended to entice the audience to be critical to patterns of mass consumption rather than serving as a criticism in itself of the Beatles (more about this later in this analysis). It is noteworthy to point out that Idle also plays the journalist who "tells" us the Rutles' story. He was used to playing more than one character per movie, as he did on his collaborations with Monty Python. This is a common characteristic of comedies and in this film it serves to diminish the reliability of the "documentary". It also should be pointed out that the actor who plays the phoney George is actually a South African national from Malay extraction, a completely different ethnic background from the real one. It is a well-known fact that George was deeply interested in Eastern cultures, and casting Ricky Fataar appears to be a nod to that – along with the fact that Fataar is also a musician, who has even played with the Beach Boys.

The action continues with the journalist, played by Idle, in typical hand on the microphone position, showing Rutland the fake location where the Rutles had come from. He comments that the Rutles are the ‘prefab four’ – more like prefabricated than fab(ulous) four. Suddenly the camera begins to move quickly and the journalist tries to catch up with it. That is again an allusion to a common characteristic of documentaries: the use of travelling shots. Afterwards, a collection of scenes from different moments of the Rutles career is presented, including that of a “live” performance of “Love Life”, another reference to “All You Need Is Love”. The whole tale is retold through the mockumentary with a fake Cavern bar, a fake trip to Hamburg pre stardom, a fifth Rutle who was excluded, and even a reference to their manager Leggy Mountbatten being gay (it is well acknowledge today that the Beatles’ manager, Brian Epstein, was homosexual). These are all facts known by Beatles’ fans, which make all of these references funny but are also way too obvious at times. The mother of Mountbatten even offers testimony to the fact that her son was more interested in tight trousers than the Rutles were in their music. The movie also points out to the fact that Leggy was Jewish (like Epstein) by mentioning that later he wrote an autobiography called “A Cellarful of Goys”⁴¹.

After showing some more scenes from their beginnings and their rise to fame, the audience then receives testimony from Mick Jagger, who recalls how he felt the first time he saw the Rutles and

⁴¹ Goy is a term commonly used by the Jewish community to describe non-Jewish people. In real life, Epstein did write a book called “A Cellarful of Noise”.

the fuss about them, that he thought to himself that it could not be too difficult to become famous and that he and the other original Rolling Stones should have a go at it themselves. It is also known that the Beatles and the Rolling Stones lived an intense rivalry over the years in terms of sales, publicity, and of course, music. In fact, even today many people like to side themselves with one or the other group, but such rivalry was simply for marketing purposes, as “in real life” they actually were friends. Jagger goes on to say that “composing to the Stones really happened”, unlike what seemed to be the case for the Rutles.

It is noteworthy that in the movie, the different music composing styles of McCartney and Lennon are acknowledged, with the influences of Dirk, (Paul’s mock version) being more melodic, sugary and popish. On the other hand, Nasty’s songs are more irreverent and witty, just as John’s compositions were. In fact, the surname “Nasty” might have been a nod to the well-known rebellious nature of John Lennon. Not that the real artist was necessarily nasty, but he was certainly regarded as such by some. There is one scene in *All You Need Is Cash* that demonstrates this well: Nasty is walking down the street when a reporter comments to him that some people are saying that they (the Rutles) are staying away from Liverpool since they have become famous, to which he replies: “We haven’t been staying away so much as not coming here”. There is indeed a slight difference in the meanings of the two statements, but it is so subtle that some might consider such comment to be vile. In real life, John was certainly a master of

double-entendre, as exemplified by his infamous quote about their fame and Jesus Christ. This trait definitely brought him a lot of attention, not always of the positive type. As for John's reaction to the movie, for example, he was actually kind, according to Neil Innes⁴². The only one that actually had "no comments" to make about the film was Paul McCartney, an indicator that he probably did not like it. Ringo liked the happy bits but not the sad ones. As for George Harrison, he even participated in it by playing a TV news reporter.

The action continues with the Rutles' first trip to the United States. Their excitement, the fans and the media attention that they got upon their arrival to New York is shown just as it really happened. They even "stole" the announcement of the Beatles that Ed Sullivan made on his show in 1963, by simply dubbing over the moment when he calls their name. This use of actual footage could have gotten the production into trouble, but fortunately they managed to use editing and other resources in a manner that did not infringe on any copyrights. In that regard, using real footage is great for making parodies, but it also implies in some sort of closeness to the subject. It is in moments like these that the movie perhaps demonstrates some reverence to what it makes fun of, and also tries to get closer to reality. By using old footage, the film also emphasizes the importance of audiovisual media in maintaining some sort of collective memory, and thus the role of real documentaries.

⁴²According to Innes in an interview that may be found at:
<http://www.iankitching.me.uk/music/bonzos/rutle-remem.html>.

In that sense, using “actual” images and going to “actual” locations is even mentioned in an exaggerated fashion in the film, to emphasize how reliable the documentary should be considered. This can be understood as a nod (and perhaps criticism) to the documentary’s genre need to be overly faithful to reality. As an example of this, the film makes fun of the usage of real locations. One such instance occurs when in a sequence, the reporter says that he is in Liverpool when he is actually in New York, until he suddenly (and rather absurdly) realizes his error. This “misplacement” trick is used more than once in the movie.

In another exposed attempt to support his arguments, the journalist tries to get critics’ opinion of the Rutles’ music. After being literally kicked out by a serious Oxford academic, the reporter finds a drug-addicted looking, Californian hippie professor who goes on and on, talking about their sound without really saying anything relevant. The next step in order for them to find out if the Rutles’ sound is indeed of any cultural value is to investigate their roots in the blues. Thus they travel to New Orleans with that purpose, and “just to see how expensive it is to make those documentaries”, in the reporter’s own words.

There he meets Blind Lemon Pye, who actually says that all he knows he learned from the Rutles, not the other way around. When the reporter asks him where their music came from, he replies “next door”, which was the house of Rutting Orange Peel (yet another

musician with a proper blues name), who confirms that the Rutles had ripped him off. His wife denies it, saying that whenever anyone goes there to make a documentary about “white music” he claims to have had his songs stolen. Nevertheless, it is a well-known fact that the origin of rock and roll lies on Southern blues, and that a lot of black musicians never received as much praise as other successful white rock stars⁴³. By bringing up the subject, the movie acknowledges this relationship between the genres and seems to imply that whilst the Rutles played silly romantic songs, the roots of the blues are much deeper and more meaningful. It can also be argued that the Beatles’ music related much more to rockabilly than to blues. In fact, other bands (such as the Rolling Stones) were much more connected to the latter style than they were. To offer a clear example, while the Beatles had a lot to do with Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones resembled more like Muddy Waters.

The film goes on to talk about other projects of the Rutles, such as a book written by Nasty called “Out of Me Head”. In real life, John did release his first book in 1964, called “In His Own Write”, a melange of nonsensical poems and prose. The Rutles go on touring and meeting famous people, as did the Beatles in real life. Their other ventures are also mentioned, for example their merchandise and movies, such as “A Hard Day’s Rut” and “Yellow Submarine Sandwich”. In the original *Yellow Submarine* (1968), most of the surreal dialogues were written by Scouser poet Roger McGough, though he did not receive any official credit for this at the time.

⁴³ See Simon Frith’s comment about this exploitation (1983, p. 17).

McGough makes an appearance as himself, just to confirm that he knew the Rutles. After building up McGough's credentials, the reporter turns away from him, probably a reference to him not being credited in *Yellow Submarine*. It might be the case that many others contributed to the success of the Beatles without ever receiving acknowledgement. Scenes from their movie "Ouch!" are shown. This hyperbolic version of *Help!* (1965) shows them running around on a beach and being chased by a fat native. The irony in this case arises from the fact that the documentary claims to have been shot in location, which in that case is said to have been Switzerland (just like *Help!* was really shot in Austria), but the setting shown looks nothing like the Alpine country.

Events from the Beatles' actual biography are exposed in twisted and comical ways, such as the wedding of Barry (Ringo), which turns out messy when the bride mistakenly gets married to some Scotsmen instead of the drummer. In real life, Ringo had to speed along his wedding because the bride got pregnant. The Rutles' last live concert for a big audience was at the "Che" Stadium (which according to the documentary was named after the guerrilla leader "Che Stadium", an obvious reference to Che Guevara). In real life, the Beatles had their last tour in the summer of 1966, and one of the last concerts was at Shea Stadium in New York, hence the pun. The real band decided that they were better off not travelling anymore, and just focusing on their albums and other types of entrepreneurships. At this concert, they had a tiny stage in the middle of a massive stadium, and as their public was always getting

bigger and bigger, it had reached the point where they could no longer even hear themselves playing. That was about the time that the Beatles decided to make a change in their careers and become more experimental.

Unlike most bands today that tend to start out as “indie” and then perhaps “sell out”, the Beatles took the reverse direction, being very commercial at the beginning and deciding to become more alternative later on. It was also around this time when the Jesus Christ quote polemic came up. In the Rutles’ version of the issue, the excuse was that Nasty was misheard, that he was actually referring to Rod Stewart and not God, when he said that “They were bigger than R(g)od”. Their albums were burnt regardless, just like in real life. It was also about this time that the Rutles were introduced (via Bob Dylan) to “tea”. This substance, which has actually always been very popular in Britain, is just a generic (and rather innocuous) way to represent the Beatles involvement with illicit drugs, which were so popular at those psychedelic times – especially cannabis and LSD. It is also an obvious pun with the word “pot”, and in fact a lot of “tea pots” and tea parties footages are shown. Under the influence of such substance, the Rutles went on to compose and release their album “Sgt. Rutter’s only Darts Club Band”, their version of Sgt. Pepper’s.

They had a spiritual guru as well, their version of Indian born Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; in their version it was a man called Arthur Sultan, a “mystic” from Surrey, who had great influence on them,

especially on Stig. They also travelled with him, this time to a place called Bognor, Sussex (instead of Bangor, India). It was there that they received the “tragic” news that Leggy Mountbatten had left to take a teaching position in Australia. In real life, the tragedy was that Brian Epstein had died from an overdose. Maharishi at the time diminished the importance of this event, claiming something along the lines that the physical world was not important. This is played out comically in the film, when the concept of dying is swapped for going to Australia and with the Rutles giving an interview saying that Arthur told them they should not feel too bad about Mountbatten not “being around” anymore. As in real life, this event gave the band the opportunity to begin to take the lead in business matters.

The band begins to take more control of things by releasing a new movie, *Tragical History Tour*, which turns out to be their first flop, according to the reporter. The Beatles films were, of course, a great influence on the overall aesthetics of *All You Need is Cash*, and this is very clear in this version of *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967). The mockumentary’s version intends to look very much like a pastiche of the original. Nonetheless, the original was already very parodic, as if it was a hallucinogenic version of an American road movie. Instead of different animal heads, for instance, all of the Rutles wore pig heads, and the lyrics of the main song are even more nonsensical. The hyperbolic images add up to comic effect. They even mimic them going down the stairs while snapping their fingers dressed in white garments. Another movie financed by them was

Yellow Submarine Sandwich, which, like the original, is a trippy cartoon filled with Rutles' songs.



Figure 4: The Beatles' movies were the main source of parody in *All You Need is Cash*.

The next move for the Rutles' autonomy was to create their own corporation, Rutle Corp. Nasty and Dirk take the initiative to announce the business to the press, a demonstration that in real life, it seemed that John and Paul were always on the lead of everything. The film's version of the Apple Corps (pronounced 'Apple Core', as a pun) logo is a banana instead of an apple. Jointly they declare that their (naive) intention is to help people. As in real life this enterprise turns out to be unsuccessful, and the Rutles end up losing a lot of money. It is at this point that George Harrison makes a cameo as a TV journalist reporting on the alleged bankruptcy of

Rutle Corps. Michael Palin, another Monty Python member, makes an appearance as the Rutles' press agent. His character, Eric Manchester, denies such allegations while in the background of the scene we see that objects are being cleared out of the office. This builds up the comic effect, but in real life the Beatles indeed had considerable financial losses. The Rutles also had a shop, which, unprofitable, is blown up by Nasty (unlike the real life one, which was simply shut down). Today, Apple Corps Ltd, reformulated as a simple instrument that administrates licenses and all other Beatles-related issues, manages to be a successful organisation.

As for their personal lives, this was about the time that the Rutles started letting their relationships with women interfere with the band. Dirk got himself a beautiful and exotic wife (played by Bianca Jagger). He is shown with her in a video pathetically resembling the one from *Something*, while she seems to be rather bored by his romantic antics. Nasty married a pretentious artist who is indirectly introduced as the daughter of Hitler. It is a well-known fact that Yoko Ono is considered by many to be a key character in the demise of the Beatles and therefore a tyrannical looking character inspired by her was a must. The couple announces their engagement to the press while taking a shower together, with their clothes on (unlike what John and Yoko did, talking to the press on their honeymoon bed, both naked). Just as the real couple did, they claim to be doing it for world peace and other meaningless assertions. They also make a movie together named with a pun: "A Thousand feet of film". It looks like an experimental venture,

featuring many feet doing mad things, such as dialling a telephone. As for Stig, he was thought to be dead around the time of the release of “Shabby Road”, as happened with Paul McCartney in 1969. And Barry “disappeared” for some time, which could have been for a tax dodge or a way to seek attention. In real life, Ringo actually dropped out of the band for a brief period in 1968.

After his honeymoon, Nasty went on to meet a promoter who he “adored” (according to the narrator) named Ron Decline. We are introduced to this character (played by the late John Belushi), in a very comical scene in which he is being followed by a couple of bodyguards, while everyone in the office appears to be afraid of him. There is even a background image of someone who had committed suicide, preferring this to actually meeting Decline. In real life, this character was based on Allen Klein, an American record label executive who had also managed other acts, including the Rolling Stones, and who was known for his ruthless methods. Lennon wanted Klein to take over the Beatles’ management after the death of Epstein, much to the discontentment of the other band members who did not trust him. Klein was eventually found guilty of tax evasion. The character is seen a bit later in the action, talking to himself while looking in the mirror, as if he were talking to someone else – though this is not revealed at first, making it appear to the audience that he is actually talking to another person (most likely Nasty).

Further disagreements between members (both in real life and in the mockumentary) led to the group's ultimate breakup. As the character Eric Manchester puts it, "suddenly everyone got very litigious". All of them at that point had different interests and were fed up with each other. The final meeting of the band, which was held so that they could reach agreements between their lawyers, accountants, each other and everyone else involved, is portrayed as a proper battlefield. Their final enterprise, *Let It Rot*, was released as an album, film and lawsuit. Just as was shown in the *Let It Be* documentary, the band gave their final concert on a rooftop, only to be stopped by the police. It is relevant to mention that the original film captured the creative process behind the album, as well as the fact that it was a public display of how bad the relationships amongst the Beatles had become by this point.

The outcome of post-break up life for each member is again presented in a very comic way: Dirk formed a punk rock group called Punk Floyd; Nasty is seen in a wheelchair and is said to have turned his back on the world; Barry became a hair dresser; and Stig turned into a female air hostess for Air India. In order to know the public opinion about the band and thus attempt to legitimize what had been exposed, the news reporter stops a woman on the street (played by Gilda Radner) to ask her for her thoughts on the band. The woman appears disinterested in the subject at first, to the point of even denying that she knows anything about them. It is only after being slapped by the journalist that she starts talking (and ultimately she talks too much) about the group, about facts that many people

know, such as their place of origin and song names. This scene seems to indicate that around the time of release of *All You Need is Cash* (1978) the Beatles were considered to be somewhat forgotten. It was only when pressed that people would talk about them and the overload of public attention that they used to have. One of the final scenes shows another travelling shot, this time one that runs over the journalist, who was standing on the same zebra path as in the “Shabby Road” album picture. After the accident, from the hospital, the reporter asks Mick Jagger his opinion on the band’s break up. He says that basically women got in the way. Jagger then makes the final statement, saying that he hopes the Rutles will never get back together.

It is interesting to notice that around these years the apparent perception people had about the band was that they would only reunite if it would be financially convenient to them. In fact, Lorne Michaels⁴⁴ offered them a cheque for three thousand US dollars for them to reunite during the first season of *SNL* (1975-6). That was intended mainly as a joke, of course - for one, this payment would have been far too little⁴⁵. Nevertheless, it was a joke that suggested that people still liked and remembered them, although their market value was not the same as some years before, when they broke up.

⁴⁴ *SNL*’s creator and executive producer.

⁴⁵ Ironically enough, according to an interview given by John to *Playboy* magazine that was actually published after his death (January 1981 edition), he and Paul were in fact together in New York on the night that Lorne made the offer and considered going to the *SNL* studios as a gag, but they eventually gave up on the idea.

All You Need is Cash was indeed the union of two groundbreaking TV comedies: *Saturday Night Live* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Some of SNL's members made cameos in the movie, as Lorne Michaels also used the opportunity to promote his show's cast: Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, and the already mentioned ones, Gilda Radner and John Belushi. From *Flying Circus*, Eric Idle and Neil Innes provided the (necessary) sense of Britishness to the film. It is to be noted that Innes did a very good job of capturing John Lennon's accent and mannerisms, and that Idle does, in fact, look a bit like Paul McCartney (or at least he did in the film). Idle, besides playing multiple characters in the movie (four, to be precise) and co-directing it, also wrote the script. Other famous people were also invited to be a part of the project, including Paul Simon and Ron Wood. Mick Jagger's participation was vital because the commentaries that he made were as if he were actually speaking in a documentary about the Beatles. It appears that this was indeed the most appropriate time to make a mockumentary about the band. Had it been made some years later, in the face of John's tragic murder, the idea of the film perhaps would have been shelved as it could be considered disrespectful. It was only decades after, in 2004, that Idle decided to make a sequel, named *The Rutles 2: Can't Buy Me Lunch*, which was not as successful as the original.

All You Need is Cash is filled with small details, most of which follow the chronological order of the Beatles' real life events. This helps in terms of narrative, as even though the film is constructed in a documentary format, it still feels as if a story is being told. In

terms of structure, there are two key aspects to highlight regarding the film:

1. The use of traditional documentary expository mode tools:

interviews with individuals who legitimize what is being shown, the presence of a narrator, the importance of being realistic and using actual footage (from old news or other movies) to validate the point that is to be made. *All You Need is Cash* uses all of these resources, sometimes in an ironic way, as if trying to downplay the relevance of extreme realism. The documentary format was probably chosen because some of its features were already used in other media products that the film creators had worked on previously. *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, for instance, included numerous fake news skits that may have later inspired the creation of *All You Need Is Cash*. The fake documentary format itself was also becoming more common, and the film producers took the initiative to associate this mode to a music-related theme. Nonetheless, the main target of mockery in this particular case was not the documentary genre per se, but the band. This realization leads us to the next point.

2. The Beatles' media image was the main source of parody.

It is perhaps difficult to realize in today's over-mediated world, but back then it was somewhat innovative to imagine ways to capitalize on music rather than by just playing instruments. Elvis and other artists also made films too, but no one before the Beatles developed the concept of "attacking" different media at the same time to the extent to which they did. Therefore one of the main goals of the

mockumentary might have been to criticize the group's overexposure and the shameless profits that they and their representatives received. They were a plateful of mass consumerism: cute boys singing catchy love songs, selling merchandising and making movies in a pre-MTV time when the concept of video clips was yet to be developed.

As previously mentioned, the Beatles' movies were one of the main sources of the mockumentary in the construction of its visual look. *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), for instance, might even be considered by some to be a mockumentary of sorts, as it follows the Beatles' crazy routine, full of fans and commitments, in documentary style. It cannot be considered to be a full documentary however, because the situations presented were clear simulations. It is not the original music mockumentary either, because it does not have the same intentions as a mockumentary, such as parodying or criticizing a specific format or subject.

All of the Beatles' films contained hyperbolic features. *Help!*, for instance, portrayed them as superheroes of sort. Evidently this exaggeration contributed enormously to the making of *All You Need Is Cash*. The film producers only had to slightly overstate the images in order to create full parodies and consequently add to the comic effect. Other things that were popular at the time were also easily turned into parodies: Pathé news, for example, became Pathétic News, and a French version of The Beach Boys was shown, a group simply called "Les Garçons de la Plage".

In terms of common aspects that *All You Need is Cash* shares with other music-related mockumentaries, it is noteworthy that the film can be associated with both a specific era and particular cultural phenomena. *This Is Spinal Tap* depicts the universe of Heavy Metal bands in the early 1980s, *Fear of a Black Hat* mocks hip-hop music in the 1990s and *A Mighty Wind* evokes feelings of nostalgia for a long-gone music era (1960s folk), in the early XXI century. As for *All You Need is Cash*, the film cannot be truly understood if it is not contextualized in the way in which the Beatles were perceived in the 1960s and 1970s. Each film approaches different aspects of the music industry, but all four films (and in fact, any other music mockumentary) share these differences as a similarity: in order to make their mockery more effective, they all need a cultural basis that is larger than the criticism of the documentary genre in itself.

It may be argued that even though the movie was critical of the Beatles as a product, it also shows some sort of reverence to them. Perhaps the producers' intention was not only to mock the group but also to somehow re-enact what they used to be. Lacking any real perspective of their reuniting at the end of the 1970s, making a parody movie about them was one way to keep the "dream" alive, even after John Lennon declared it was over in one of his solo career songs. With its accurate portrayal of events occurring in the Beatles' lives, and by employing parody to help the audience think about them from a different perspective, *The Rutles: All You Need*

is Cash is indeed better than any official Beatles' documentary or fictional film could ever be.

4.2. *This is Spinal Tap*

What else remains to be said about a film that has already been the subject of so many analyses? *This Is Spinal Tap* has been scrutinized by authors such as Carl Platinga (1998), Jordi Sánchez-Navarro (2001 and 2005) and Ethan De Seife (2007). Platinga relates the film to issues of masculinity, while Sánchez-Navarro writes about it in the wider context of mockumentaries, and De Seife, with the devotion of a true fan, conducts a more general study of the film in terms of its comic, musical and mock text. The film is indeed the quintessential music mockumentary, and therefore an analysis of it must be part of any study in the field. The aim here is to try to find additional issues to discuss, whatever other research studies about the movie might possibly be lacking.

The “plot” of the mockumentary is as follows: Spinal Tap is a British heavy metal/hard rock band that is going on tour in the United States to promote their latest album, “Smell the Glove”. TV commercial director Marty DiBergi (Rob Reiner) decides to follow them in order to make an observational documentary about the group. They had been together for almost 20 years, having changed musical styles and members along the way. In 1982, the band consists of lead singer/guitarist David St. Hubbins (Michael

McKean), lead guitarist Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest), bass player Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer), keyboardist Viv Savage (David Kaff) and drummer Mick Shrimpton (R.J. Parnell). David and Nigel were childhood friends and before creating Spinal Tap they had played separately in skiffle bands until they got together to assemble The Thamesmen, a rhythm and blues group that had one hit single in 1965, shamelessly entitled “Gimme Some Money”. Around 1967 they changed their name to Spinal Tap, when Derek joined the group. By then they were playing psychedelic rock and their hit song was “Listen (to the Flower People)”. TV performances of both those songs are featured in the movie, and those are the only moments when the film uses expository mode techniques – showing old images of the band, as some sort of memorabilia of their old times, and to show how much they had changed over the years. At some point in the 1970s they made the transition to becoming a hard rock ensemble. The story takes place in the early 1980s, when things seemed to be heading downhill for the group.

There is much discussion about which band could have been the main source of inspiration for Spinal Tap, but the general conclusion is that there is not only one but a few that could fit the profile of their “evolution” through the years⁴⁶. In the very beginning for example, when they are shown to be simply one more R&B band, groups like The Beatles and The Rolling Stones could

⁴⁶ De Seife writes a whole chapter about the musical influences of Spinal Tap in his book, which is homonymous to the film.

have been the inspiration⁴⁷. Their psychedelic phase may remind the audience of the early years of Led Zeppelin, another band that made many transitions during its history. Later, their heavy metal phase resonates the work of many other bands, including Saxon, Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden and AC/DC. Like other metal bands, they even use the umlaut (¨) when officially writing the band's name⁴⁸. This was for decorative purposes only, another nod to the overstated idiosyncrasies of this musical style. It is also interesting to note that over the years many bands liked to identify themselves with Spinal Tap, even some that do not lean towards the heavy metal/hard-rock genre⁴⁹. This demonstrates that despite being a thorough portrait of the world of heavy metal, Spinal Tap's journey includes plenty of universal characteristics, sharing commonalities with many bands and musicians. This is one of the characteristics that leads the film to be considered the most exemplary music mockumentary.

Many of the events that take place in the film could have in fact happened to any band: the excitement of the beginning of the tour, followed by boring PR parties, censorship from the record label, technical problems that arise, fights between members, groupies, cancelled concerts-- all of these are features in the film and are common in the music industry. In fact, in spite of its very parodic

⁴⁷ Similarities also include emulating the creative duo tradition, as David and Nigel could be like Lennon/McCartney and Jagger/Richards.

⁴⁸ Some other bands that use the unnecessary umlaut are Mötley Crüe and Motörhead.

⁴⁹ Bands such as Kings of Leon and Kasabian, which are from another generation and quite different from Spinal Tap in terms of style, still claim to identify with them in a mini-documentary made for the film's 2009 DVD release.

nature, many uninformed viewers believed that they were watching a real documentary about a real band when first coming across the movie⁵⁰. This is very telling about the way in which the film is constructed. At points it does seem to be a mere caricature of the musical genre that it portrays, but there are also many accurate facts represented, things that could really have happened to any band. In an interview by Rick Gervais in 2006⁵¹, Christopher Guest says that the inspiration for Spinal Tap came from watching a rather stupid British bassist in the lobby of a hotel looking for his lost bass guitar. Guest and the other co-creators of the film then decided to approach the subject in the mockumentary format. In visual terms, as it was previously mentioned, the main source of inspiration was the documentary directed by Martin Scorsese (DiBergi is his mock version) released in 1978, *The Last Waltz*. This documentary features many “fly-on-the-wall” techniques.

Another element that contributes to the veracity of the portrayal is the fact that all of the band members have musical knowledge. Guest, McKean and Shearer composed all of the songs and they in fact play the instruments. As for the lyrics, they are akin to those of similar bands of the time, even though they can sound rather hyperbolic. Their live performances are also similar to those of other hard rock bands. The double-neck guitar and bass, the over-

⁵⁰ This is asserted by individuals such as De Seife and in some of the commentaries made in the mini-documentary featured on the DVD. Many factors could have possibly contributed to this belief, including their convincing British accents (the actors who play the band members are actually American) and their songs, which sound very much like the ones from the bands they mock.

⁵¹ *Ricky Gervais meets... Christopher Guest*, released by Channel 4 (UK) on 25/12/2006.

the-top virtuoso solos, the exaggerated outfits - it is all in there. In one remarkable scene, Nigel Tufnel rocks his solo so hard that he ends up falling on his back. As he does not want to stop playing, he sums a roadie to help him get up again, in one of the most comic sequences of the film.

The lyrics deserve special attention. Most of them talk about “sexy” themes, such as “Tonight I’m Gonna Rock You Tonight” and “Big Bottom”. These songs can easily be perceived as misogynistic, but in a rather subtle and even seductive way. Coming from a generation that was young in the 1960s, Spinal Tap members saw sexuality in such a free and naughty way that they did not even realize that some of their songs could be considered offensive. In fact, when public relations representative Bobbi Fleckman (Fran Drescher) comments that their original album cover (which was censored), featuring a naked woman in a submissive position with a man pushing a black glove to her face, could be considered sexist and says that they should “get out of the 60s”⁵², they get confused and Nigel asks “What is wrong with being *sexy*?” The issue of chauvinism is addressed further when Jeanine (June Chadwick), David’s girlfriend, joins them on tour.

⁵² About this “60s” aspect of *This Is Spinal Tap*, Edward George makes a very insightful remark: “It was funny if you accepted that the counter-culture of the 60s was beaten by its own ineptitude and left a legacy of psycho-social dysfunctionalia (*sic*) and atrophied cash-cow forms for media conglomerate pickings” (GEORGE, E., 1994. *Beneath the Hats*. In: *Sight and Sound*, vol. 4, n° 11, pp. 26-27). This quote was actually featured in an article about *Fear of a Black Hat*, for the purpose of comparing both films. Whereas this remark is very acute in regards to some of the aftereffects of the 1960s, it is open to debate as to whether or not this aspect was the main target of parody in *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Jeanine enters at a point when the tour is already going very badly, and her arrival makes things even worse. She is the stereotypical groupie: pretentious and artsy, with an obsession for astrology, she even offers unsolicited managerial advice to manager Ian Faith (Tony Hendra), who obviously hates her. Jeanine disrupts the band's relationships, in particular the relationship between Nigel and David. When all goes to hell after the Stonehenge fiasco⁵³ and Ian leaves the band, she takes over as their manager. Things then get even worse, and Nigel eventually leaves the band too, after she had arranged for them to play at an Air Force base party. Her character does not have any redeeming qualities, so she is viewed as despicable and laughable to the audience. The point that the creators of *Spinal Tap* were possibly trying to make is that there were indeed many women who had this same role in the history of rock: Yoko Ono, Nancy Spungen and (later) Courtney Love for example, could all adapt to Jeanine's profile. That does not mean that the film necessarily endorses the opinion that all women involved with bands are opportunists, but rather, that rock culture traditionally frames them in this kind of role, instead of as creators or collaborators. In fact, considering the issues discussed by Plantinga in his essay "Gender, Power and a Cucumber: Satirizing

⁵³ During a concert the band incorporates a replica of Stonehenge, which is mistakenly made to be 18 inches tall instead of 18 feet. This comes as a surprise to the band members and to the audience. The scene is rendered even funnier as it features dwarfs dancing around the tiny monument replica. A point to be made here is how the "live" performances in the film build a connection with the public. It is almost as if we were really there, observing their public humiliations.

Masculinity in *This Is Spinal Tap*”⁵⁴, the film goes even further on the subject.



Figure 5: Jeanine, the stereotypical groupie represented in *This Is Spinal Tap*.

In this article, Plantinga writes about the culture of enhanced virility in the world of heavy metal and how this is featured in the film. The title of the article comes from the scene where drummer Derek Smalls cannot go through a security check in the airport because it is found that he has a cucumber wrapped in foil hidden inside his pants. The sexism in their lyrics, their treatment of women, and even the somewhat homoerotic friendship between Nigel and David all suggest that one of the main subjects of the film is gender politics. Nevertheless, to approach the film only from this

⁵⁴ In: GRANT, B. and SLONIOWSKI, J. (ed.). *Documenting the documentary: close readings of documentary film and video*, pp. 318-332. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

perspective seems rather limited as it does not account for other issues presented, such as the fact that many musicians are simply unintelligent people playing rock and roll not for the art, but for the benefits of fame.

This is demonstrated in quite a few scenes, sometimes in a quite direct manner. At the very end of the movie, when the credits are rolling and we see the final interviews with the band members, soon-to-be-dead drummer Mick Shrimpton confesses that he is in this business for the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll – or at least as long as there are still sex and drugs, he will carry on doing it. As for keyboardist Viv Savage, he claims that his life philosophy is to “have a good time all the time”. David, Nigel and Derek say even sillier things. When asked what he would be if he were not in a rock band, David says he would like to be a “full time dreamer”. Another example of their general stupidity is displayed in one movie’s funniest scenes, when they get lost backstage before starting their Cleveland concert. This scene seems to indicate that the band members might be quite dumb, although some other bands have stated that has happened to them as well⁵⁵.

There is also the factor of their pretentiousness as musicians, which is a very common feature in the heavy metal world. They take themselves and their music very seriously, even though the outcome might not be exactly as they planned. Nigel, for instance, is a truly gifted guitarist and he claims to have classical music influences. At

⁵⁵ This is also told in the mini-documentary featured on the 2009 DVD.

one point he is composing a piece on the piano and Marty is interviewing him. He says he is writing a “Mach” melody (as in, a mix of Mozart and Bach). When Marty asks the name of the song, he replies: “Lick My Love Pump”, a title that removes any possibility of respectfulness that the song could have had.



Figure 6: Nigel composes a “Mach” melody: *Lick My Love Pump*.

The themes presented above are indeed some of the factors that contribute to making *This Is Spinal Tap* a model for other music mockumentaries, but perhaps the most important characteristic that gives the film universal appeal is its underlying narrative. Despite being a mockumentary and not a conventional fiction, the film does have a plot that must be followed for a better understanding of the subject that it approaches. For one thing, the film follows a chronological order of events, which is common in other types of fiction. A three-act structure can also be found: the beginning of the tour is the first act, the second act would be the rising problems faced by the band, and the climax would be the moment when Nigel

leaves the band. The final act is the aftermath of this, the return of Nigel and Ian to save the group, with the final scene (epilogue) being the concert in Japan. It is a very simple and effective structure, which builds empathy with the audience. In order to relate to the story, it is not even necessary to have a great knowledge of the heavy metal world. Perhaps those who do know a lot enjoy it more because they are aware of the references, but someone who is not familiar with the genre might still appreciate the movie due to its engaging structure.

The naturalistic (yet comic) acting style contributes to the narrative development as well. When the band members are giving interviews, there is, of course, some level of self-consciousness, something that is typical in documentaries. Nevertheless, if compared to the formulaic answers that most music artists give in interviews nowadays, the Spinal Tap reactions seem much more relaxed and spontaneous. One example of that is the fact that they always seem willing to sound clever, but this intention backfires most of the times. A famous example of this is the “up to 11” scene, when Nigel is showing his guitar collection to Marty and he proudly explains that the volume of their amplifiers go up to 11 instead of just 10, and Marty asks why can they not simply play a bit louder and make 10 be the maximum. A confused Nigel clumsily repeats: “These go to 11”.

As for the “fly-on-the-wall” moments, when the band is being filmed while interacting, as if they did not notice the camera, there

are even more examples of unexpected character revelations, as would happen in a typical work of fiction. The typical documentary camera angles and montage techniques are still present, but unlike contemporary reality shows (to give one example for comparison), what is shown seems realistic and revealing and the situations do not seem forged. One illustration of this occurs just before a concert when Nigel complains about the size of the breads, because they are too small to fit the filling of his sandwiches. This is very telling about how some musicians may be excessively demanding about silly things, creating a fuss over nothing. If shot as a normal fiction, this scene could be regarded as a simple gag, and in a way it would be a disruption to the main narrative. However, as it is filmed in a (mock) documentary style, it becomes part of the main narrative, offering even more information about the characters.

Another trick used by the film authors to create empathy with the public is that of improvisation. There are, of course, guidelines that are followed so that the main story can unfold, through a written script describing the situations. However, a lot of the dialogues in *This Is Spinal Tap* are improvised⁵⁶, and this provides even more spontaneity to the film. Improvisation blends well with comedy, and it requires a lot of skill to be well done – not to mention a group of artists that are somehow “in tune” with each other. All of Christopher Guest’s mock projects involve improvisation as well, not only his other films but also the on-going story of Spinal Tap beyond the movie itself. In fact, improvisation may be one of the

⁵⁶ A fact also stated in the interview Guest gave to Ricky Gervais.

key factors to understanding why even nowadays, almost 30 years after being released, the film and the band still have a strong fan base and have gained cult status, impelling interaction with the “real” world.

Made under a tight budget, the film was not massively distributed when first released in 1984. Nonetheless, as De Seife claims (2007), it grew considerably over the years, first with the strong VHS rental culture of the late 1980s and 1990s. This “re-watching” habit later migrated to cable TV and DVDs, and more recently to Blue-Ray, film downloading, online streaming and services such as Netflix. Digital culture made the film even more accessible, significantly expanding its fan base. Nowadays, people who were not even born when it was released know many of its details by heart and can quote its most memorable dialogues. Fan sites have even been created including their fake discography and other information.

The (fake) band’s will to keep the cult alive has probably also helped to maintain this growth. In 1984, Spinal Tap made its first tour, possibly in order to promote the film’s release. In 1992, they released a new album, “Break Like the Wind”, and went on tour again. One of the concerts was turned into a TV special, *A Spinal Tap Reunion: The 25th Anniversary London Sell-Out*, with special guests including Jeanine and Marty DiBergi and real artists such as Jeff Beck. Auditions for a new drummer were made⁵⁷, and some of

⁵⁷ This was obviously a reference to the on-going joke that all Spinal Tap drummers end up dying in odd circumstances.

the candidates were already famous players from bands like Jane's Addiction and Fleetwood Mac. In 1998, they made another mockumentary, this time a shorter one entitled *Spinal Tap: the Final Tour* (which ultimately was not in fact the last tour) and two years later they released their official web page where fans could download their song "Back from the Dead". In 2001, they toured again, having as their opening act The Folkmen, the same band portrayed by the actors in *A Mighty Wind*, which would be released two years later. In 2007, they joined forces against Global Warming and performed in Live Earth London⁵⁸. For this, a short video was made, again "directed" by DiBergi, with the director trying to reunite the band, as each member had gone in a very different direction⁵⁹. During this time they have also appeared in numerous TV shows, performing live and giving interviews without breaking character. They have also appeared in other fictional works, such as in *The Simpsons*⁶⁰. In the commentaries of the *This Is Spinal Tap* DVD the band members also speak in character, as if they were watching a real documentary about their lives. Their last venture together was a short film named *Stonehenge: 'Tis a Magic Place*,

⁵⁸ One anecdote from this event: When they played "Big Bottom" they were joined by all of the other bassists that played at the event with other groups. In addition to the three basses who played in the official song version, this live performance was possibly the one having the greatest number of bass guitar players in history!

⁵⁹ Nigel was working in a farm overseeing miniature horses and David had become a hip-hop producer. They had, of course, aged considerably, but they were still willing to rock.

⁶⁰ Harry Shearer is one of the official "voices" cast in the series. Amongst others, he plays Mr Burns and Ned Flanders. It is also worth mentioning that like other TV shows (such as *ER* and *South Park*), *The Simpsons* also featured a special episode that used the mockumentary format. In their case it was "Behind the Laughter", season 11, episode 22.

where they actually visit the monument. The film was released in 2009 along with their third “real” studio album (14th in the sheer fictional level), also entitled “Back from the Dead”. All of these initiatives have certainly helped to maintain the cult status of Tap. Or could it be that the fans were actually the ones always expecting them to come back? If that is the case, then it is very unlikely that we have heard the last of them.

Spinal Tap’s journey can be easily understood through contemporary concepts such as “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins, 2006), even though their (so to speak) multimedia enterprises began even before the digital culture had become widely spread. In fact, the so-called convergence culture has managed to accelerate information interchange and to create new media where this interchange is possible. However, the concept of such interchange can be traced far back in time, possibly to the creation of the mass media in itself. When cinema was invented, for instance, it did not take long for novels to be turned into films. As for musicals, they did not simply sell as audiovisual products, but also thanks to their soundtracks. Another example is the practice of selling movie character dolls, which began way before films like the *Star War* series. For example, vintage dolls from *Gone with the Wind* can be found on the Internet nowadays for exorbitant prices. Therefore, *Spinal Tap*’s case should not be understood simply as a product of a postmodern culture in which information is accessed in a quick and easy manner, and where fans become active participants in the (re)creation process.

One of the key aspects contributing to the film's cult status is precisely the fact that it was shot in a mockumentary style. At the time of its release this format was considered somewhat of a novelty, and even nowadays it is still perceived as a distinguished audiovisual mode. Mockumentaries also imply a sense of realism (albeit fake) that most regular fictions lack. In order to better understand the influence of the film on the audience perhaps we should resort to much older concepts, such as suspension of disbelief (Taylor Coleridge, 1817), which was initially created for a literary context, but that can also be applied to any other type of medium. The main idea is that audiences are willing to momentarily "forget" that they are watching a fake universe when reading/listening to/watching a work of fiction, in order to better enjoy it. In the case of *This Is Spinal Tap*, its impact would be so profound that the audience would be willing to prolong the experience, as if there was an on-going narrative beyond the film itself, a continued suspension of disbelief⁶¹. Its narrative is so effective and archetypical of what happens in the music industry that the film is not enough, the audience wants more.

The best works of fiction manage to somehow construct a universe of their own, with their own intrinsic rules and peculiarities, and such is the case with *Spinal Tap*. Evidently the well-informed

⁶¹ By contrast, Hoechsmann and Cucinelli (2007, p. 97) mention suspension of disbelief as a somewhat out-of-date tool, which would no longer be adequate to analyse contemporary media practices. Evidently, this research does not share their perspective.

public knows the difference between facts and fiction, but when a text is so well constructed, a connection is formed, and the issue of what is real or not becomes somewhat irrelevant. The text becomes a part of the audience's life through memory, and that is substantial enough for them. In the case of *This Is Spinal Tap*, and with the help of its creators, the audience is willing to extend the experience even beyond the cinematographic level. For those who always dreamed of being in a rock band, for instance, the movie might be a way to see what it would be like to be part of a band, with all of its ups and downs. In fact, for the minds behind the film, perhaps it was an opportunity to instantly create a band of their own, with an already (albeit invented) career. Perhaps Guest, McKean and Shearer always wanted to be in a group and that was yet another reason why they carry on performing as Spinal Tap years after the release of the movie. Also, as previously stated, for bands and musicians who do have a career, the film resonates immensely to what actually happens in their lives. Hence, *This Is Spinal Tap* might have a great affinity with those who have the sense of humour to enjoy it. Others, who might misunderstand its comic approach, may even be offended by it. Whichever way, the film does not fail to criticize the universe it portrays, but it does so in such an entertaining manner that it might also be misinterpreted as reverence.

This Is Spinal Tap is indeed a criticism of rockumentaries, a mode that was becoming more and more popular at the time of its release. In fact, nowadays even mildly famous bands make documentaries

about themselves. That might be yet another reason why the mockumentary format was chosen instead of the regular fiction one. However, beyond rockumentaries per se, the main target of criticism was the music genre that it depicts. The same happens to other music mockumentaries: inasmuch as the cinematic format is lampooned, the main object of satire is actually the music industry. In the case of *Spinal Tap*, the creators managed to build an enthralling plot using the documentary format, while also approaching subjects such as gender roles and the superficiality of rock stars. They did it so well that they built a fan base over the years that is still willing to hear (and watch) more from them.

As previously mentioned, when it was first released, the film did not receive much attention. As was the case with *All You Need is Cash*, most reviews of the film came later on, especially whenever a new edition format was about to be released. One of the exceptions to this is an article by Roger Ebert published in March 1985⁶², a few months after its theatrical release. Like most critics (especially those after him), Ebert praises the film. He states that it was “one of the funniest, most intelligent, most original films of the year”, and that “The movie is brilliant at telling its story through things that happen in the background and at the edges of the picture: By the end of the film, we know as much about the personalities and conflicts of the band members as if the movie had been

⁶² Available online at the website of *The Chicago Sun-Times* (the newspaper where Ebert has been working for decades): <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19850301/REVIEWS/503010301/1023>

straightforward narrative”. Ebert also notes that even though the movie is a fake documentary, it could indeed represent any real life pretentious, pompous rock band.

Years later, Peter Ochiogrosso wrote a review⁶³ for the *Criterion* website playing along with the idea that they were indeed a real band, and stating that they had been angered because the documentary had given them a bad image. Around the same time Jessica Winter, from *The Village Voice*, played along the same lines when writing her ‘rerelease’ review⁶⁴, declaring that even though such a long time had passed, Spinal Tap was “still the world’s loudest band”. These examples of reviews confirm that *This Is Spinal Tap* was indeed always successful not only with its fans but amongst critics. The will to make it “real”, writing the reviews as if the film was indeed a documentary, is also identifiable here. It demonstrates how the “Cult of Tap” does not regard the band simply as characters in a motion picture, as they permeated other aspects of popular culture. Spinal Tap (the band) transcended the fictional universe to become something else, something tangible to the audiences who follow them. In summary, here are some of the aforementioned key aspects of the film that might explain its popularity:

1. *This Is Spinal Tap* plays with issues of gender politics that are very common in the world of rock and roll. This is demonstrated

⁶³ See <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/144-this-is-spinal-tap#comments>

⁶⁴ Available at: <http://www.villagevoice.com/2000-09-05/film/still-the-world-s-loudest-band/1/>

mostly through the way in which masculinity is conveyed amongst the band members, and by the depiction of the character of Jeanine.

2. Despite being a fake documentary, the movie also follows a structured narrative. Its plot is very alluring and incisive, leading the audience to build a connection with what is shown.

3. The film borrows heavily on imagery from the rockumentary subgenre. The intention was obviously to parody this format. However, the main target of mockery is the depicted music genre and the music industry, as opposed to the documentary format per se. Hence why it can be classified as a degree 2 mock documentary.

4. As an observational mode documentary, *This Is Spinal Tap* benefits greatly from the fact that much of its dialogue is *ad libitum*. Improvisation is also one of the most noticeable aspects of those mockumentaries later directed by Christopher Guest, including *A Mighty Wind*. It gives the film a sense of spontaneity and naturalism that were essential to making it “believable”.

When Marty DiBergi gives his opening speech at the beginning of the movie he says: “I wanted to capture the sights, the sounds, the smells of a hard working rock band on the road. And I got that. But I got more. A lot more.” Little did the creators know that those shabby words, alluding to the senses, would ring so true to the audience that the band would actually come to outlive the film. An amusing and meaningful portrait of the genre that it mocks and of

music industry as whole, *This Is Spinal Tap* shall endure for much longer in the imaginations of everyone who appreciates its greatness.

4.3. Fear of a Black Hat

In the late 1970s, hip-hop culture emerged in the United States mostly as a form of social protest⁶⁵. More than music, it involved other expressions, such as break dancing, graffiti and rapping. Its origins are considered to be mixed: Jamaican immigrants, for example, with their own music traditions, had a great input into its creation, and so did other types of African American music, such as funk. The main melting pot was The Bronx, where people like Afrika Bambaataa became leaders of a movement whose members did not need to spend a lot of money in order to express what was on their minds.

Hegemony took its course so that the “rap” part would become the main by-product of what had been a wider artistic manifestation. More specifically, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the rise of gangsta rap, which seemed more concerned with propelling prejudices, and talking about fame and guns as opposed to approaching social problems in a truthful way. Groups such as

⁶⁵ Most of the historical data concerning the origins and evolution of hip-hop comes from a thorough article published by Vibe magazine in its December 1994 – January 1995 edition, written by Frank Owen. Available online at: http://books.google.es/books?id=dywEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA66&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

Public Enemy lost attention to acts like Ice-T and N.W.A. (“Niggaz Wit Attitudes”), who were one of the main sources of inspiration for the creation of the group portrayed in *Fear of a Black Hat*, N.W.H. (Niggaz With Hats). It was in this transitional context that the movie was released in 1993. It tells the story of a trio consisting of MCs Ice Cold (Rusty Cundieff) and Tasty Taste (Larry B. Scott), and DJ Tone Def (Mark Christopher Lawrence), via a documentary being made by Nina Blackburn (Kasi Lemmons). The mockumentary was actually written and directed by Cundieff, who also composed the songs. *Fear of a Black Hat* is quite similar to *This Is Spinal Tap* in terms of its structure. It is interesting to compare these films in terms of commonalities, but it is also essential to establish their differences, and to acknowledge *Fear of a Black Hat* by its own merits. Besides dealing with different music genres, the fact that it was made almost 10 years later, for instance, implies certain differences in terms of what was occurring in the music industry.

One example of this is the fact that in the 1990s, music videos were already an established means of music promotion, and thus the film uses a few of those as part of the narrative⁶⁶. In the case of *Spinal Tap*, their music videos were left out of the main plot⁶⁷, and nowadays they can be viewed as extras in the movie’s DVD. It is

⁶⁶ Another aspect of the early 1990s comically portrayed in the film is the technology used in these days. In a time before Internet use was widely accessible, band members were all into using pagers, and their managers used brick style mobiles.

⁶⁷ At the time of the movie’s release, videos such as Hell Hole could only be watched on MTV.

important to note that MTV was launched in 1981, and while the 1980s saw the rise of this form, early video clips were not very elaborated and sometimes were extremely tacky⁶⁸. In fact, music videos are one of the reasons why the aesthetics of the 1980s is considered to be full of visual excesses. Thus, it was probably not so interesting for the creators of *Spinal Tap* to use video clips as a main story device, but for a 1990s music mockumentary they were vital. By that decade, videos had become somewhat more sophisticated, and the visual styles were often determined by each musical genre. In the case of hip-hop, there were many black-and-white videos when the song lyrics involved violence, as is the case in “Granny Said Kick Yo Ass”⁶⁹. There were also quite a few video clips showing women dancing around a swimming pool when lyrics were “naughtier”, as in “Booty Juice”. Television news about the band was also included in the film, as if broadcasted by a fictitious music channel.

All of these “MTV materials” became part of the documentary that Nina Blackburn was making as part of her thesis. Here, commercial director Marty DiBergi from *This Is Spinal Tap* is substituted by a young African-American academic woman, willing to understand the band’s motivations and to sustain the argument that their music had political implications. Nina’s character functions both as a narrator/commentator and as a contrast to the band members. She is

⁶⁸ See “Total Eclipse of the Heart” (1983), by Bonnie Tyler, as an example.

⁶⁹ This video actually features a grandma in a rocking chair while Tasty is “kicking ass”.

educated and does not seem to come from the same background as the group.



Figure 7: Screenshot of one of the music videos featured in the film. The videos were an integral part of the narrative.

It had been decades since a significant amount of black Americans had managed to move up in society, receiving better paid jobs and increased access to higher education, and Nina was representative of this. It is from this standpoint that she is willing to understand those who did not have the same opportunities as she had, and whose only means of escaping poverty was by becoming rappers. More importantly, the contrast here also lies on the fact that she is a woman trying to understand an extremely male-chauvinist universe.

Sexism was also a part of *This Is Spinal Tap*, but the approach taken by each film on the subject is quite different. Whereas in *Spinal Tap* there is some kind of underlying seduction in their lyrics, N.W.H. songs are more shameless. They are so direct that it is easier to become offended by them. *Spinal Tap* gave us “Big Bottom”, a somewhat subtle way to talk about buttocks, whereas N.H.W. came up with “Booty Juice”, with much more explicit lyrics. It is up to the viewer to decide which representation is more disrespectful, the more understated or the more obvious one. It can be inferred that the authors of these films are not necessarily misogynistic, but were describing (and possibly criticizing) situations that were very common in the music world. In fact, sexism is a significant part of hip-hop culture in general, even nowadays, with its degrading lyrics and lack of female representatives. In the film, only once is the existence of female hip-hop performers acknowledged, in a concert where the N.W.H. boys meet the “girls”. Amongst them we can find Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme, who are the fictitious version of Salt-N-Pepa⁷⁰.

The portrayal of Tasty’s girlfriend, Cheryl (Rose Jackson), may be extremely offensive to women as well. Like Jeanine in *Spinal Tap*, she manages to spoil the band and its relationships, mostly by offering unsolicited advice about their artistic and managerial decisions. Cheryl goes one step further than Jeanine though, by sleeping with Ice Cold and with the two being caught in the act by

⁷⁰ Ironically, the four girls acknowledge the existence of the duo and claim to be better than them when they get filmed.

Tasty. That comes to a certain surprise to the audience, since Ice had always appeared to hate her. In fact, he seems to still hate her even after they have had sex. The discovery of the betrayal seals the end of N.W.H.

It is even more amusing to notice the differences between Cheryl and Nina. Cheryl seems to be a gold digger, while Nina is an intellectual, trying to make a film about an important artistic and social issue. Maybe this was a means for the creators to demonstrate that women can be fully independent and valuable. However, this is somewhat debunked by the end of the movie. Just before the final credits, when the typical “where are they now” photographs with subtitled explanations are shown, Nina is said to be pregnant and in a relationship with Ice Cold. That seems to demonstrate that perhaps in fact, she was not so different from Cheryl. It can be argued however, that it is quite significant that Nina is the main conductor of what is shown in the film, thus giving her a leading position, and therefore, offering a positive overall depiction of women. Once more we have an example of tension between criticism and flattery in a music mockumentary⁷¹.

Another feature separating *Spinal Tap* from *Fear of a Black Hat* is that of violence which is very present in the latter. This is

⁷¹ Another instance where prejudices overflow in the movie is when the band is rehearsing their dance moves and the choreographer is depicted as a very stereotypical gay man, who is shown to have an overly exaggerated “package” hiding underneath his tight trousers. Homophobia is very present in some hip-hop lyrics, and hence the audience is left to wonder if the creators of the film condone it or not.

demonstrated repeatedly in the film, mainly through the display of guns. The guitars scene from *This Is Spinal Tap* is parallel to the weapons room scene, when Tasty takes Nina there to have a look at his guns. Nina implies to him that he might be a bit paranoid for having so much artillery, to which Tasty (comically and contradictorily) replies that no one can be paranoid with so many tools to feel protected by.



Figure 8: Tasty shows his guns to Nina. Violence is one of the key themes in *Fear of a Black Hat*.

Another reference to violence is seen from the fact that every single manager from the band ends up being killed. Here, the same death joke that was used in *Spinal Tap* (in that case with the drummers) is recycled to be used in more brutal circumstances. One of the funniest verbal profanities (of many) from the film might be “We

wasn't in town when that shit happened", said by the band members whenever asked about the murder of their managers, as an attempt to distance themselves from any responsibility.

A peculiar characteristic of the band is their desire to be managed by white (and mostly Jewish) men. They say that at first they were managed by blacks (their relatives, in fact), but that they decided that it would be better for the black community if they were managed by white men – maybe because they knew they could end up dead. The Jewish manager character is a trait that the film shares with *The Rutles* (Leggy Mountbatten) and *A Mighty Wind* (Irving Steinbloom), and is a nod to the fact that there are indeed quite a few Jewish businessmen in the world of music. The first manager we are introduced to, Guy Friesch (Howie Gold), seems legitimately interested in what is best for the band, but ends up being killed in a fight between N.W.H. and another band. The next manager, Marty Rabinow (Barry Heins) is shot during the fight between Cheryl, Tasty and Ice Cold.

Violence is indeed a real life problem in the gangsta rap culture. This is demonstrated for instance in the rivalry that N.W.H. has with other groups, which leads to fights that sometimes end up with guns being fired. One of those fights shown in the film actually happens in a children's school, in a hilarious (albeit scary) scene. In fact, some musicians have died in brutal circumstances. Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. (also known as Biggie Smalls) were both murdered within 6 months of one another (between 1996 and

1997), and that increased public awareness to the fact that the hip-hop culture had indeed become too violent. Instead of the overdoses from rock and roll, young rap stars died from gunshots. After these two murders, there were quite a few manifestations against violence from rappers themselves, and the situation seemed to improve. However, hip-hop music is still very much associated with violence, and one of the justifications for this is the fact that it is closely tied with issues of racism.

Racism is indeed a large component of *Fear of a Black Hat*. The film seems to reinforce certain stereotypes, such as that white and black people cannot truly live together in harmony. This is demonstrated for instance when Ice Cold and Nina are in his car and they are stopped by the police. The police officer is extremely aggressive (and stupid) to Ice, suspecting that he stole the car. In a comic moment, he only believes Ice when shown a picture of the white man who sold him the car.

The name of the band is explained by Ice Cold to be a metaphor for racial empowerment: he says that back in the time when black people were slaves, they spent all day working in the sun with no hats, but now they do have hats and they want to demonstrate that to society. As for the film's title, it is taken from the band's latest album, *Fear of a Black Hat*. In order to avoid censorship, the trio decides to change record labels. They move to a "blacker" one, whose president, Geoffrey Lennox (Barry Shabaka Henley), seems very into political issues and skin tone classification, a true

reminiscent of the years of protest, decades before the band's existence. The group members seem a bit confused by his comments, but are satisfied with the fact that they will have more artistic freedom. The scene also demonstrates that, unlike what they claim, the band is in the musical business more for money and easy access to sex than for political reasons.

Another instance where the issue of racism is approached occurs when we are introduced to the character of Vanilla Sherbet (Devin Kamin). In this case, it is primarily racism from black people directed towards whites. Sherbet is clearly a mock version of Vanilla Ice and other white rappers, who ends up being beaten up by N.W.H. Hip-hop culture was born as a form of expression for socially excluded ethnic minorities, but that does not mean that white people cannot also enjoy and/or create this type of music. One of the questions that DiBergi poses to the band at the end of *Spinal Tap* is if their music is racist because their audience is predominately white, to which the group simply denies this. In that case, Nigel and David might actually have been right, since different kinds of music should not be limited to specific ethnic groups. Although this tends to happen, it is very restrictive to say that only black people can enjoy hip-hop. In the case of Vanilla Ice, he was indeed merely a music industry product, but it can be argued that there are white musicians who have managed to create meaningful hip-hop songs, such as Eminem and The Beastie Boys. Whether or not they are musically authentic, or whether or not their

songs are of high quality is another issue, perhaps mainly a matter of personal taste.

One more racial stereotype portrayed by the film is that of “Black Cinema”. Ice Cold is cast in a movie directed by Jake Spingleton⁷² (Eric Laneauville), a mock version of Spike Lee and John Singleton. His film seems to be very realistic and dramatic, depicting the problem of drug trafficking in black communities by showing a baby who had become a dealer. Of course this hyperbole serves mainly comic purposes, but it is also obviously a direct criticism of this type of cinema. It aims to portray this pretentiousness as ineffective in terms of actually solving the problems of poor black communities. As previously stated, the main target of criticism of mockumentaries related to the music is not necessarily the documentary genre, but mostly the music industry, and *Fear of a Black Hat* is no exception. Nevertheless, the fact that Nina seems to take her job so seriously, combined with the criticism of films made by directors such as Lee, might indicate that Cundieff did in fact aim to discredit these sorts of audiovisual creations. His film is a comedy, and therefore, it is meant to entertain. However, Cundieff probably intended to create a satire with more than mere comic intentions, turning it into an instrument of social criticism as well. The film was produced independently and was released at the Sundance festival in 1993 but waited more than a year before finally being released in theatres in June 1994,

⁷² Ice Cold also has other “creative” projects going on, such as writing books, one of them entitled F.Y.M. (“Fuck Y’all Motherfuckers”).

which means Cundieff probably did not have any special privileges, as opposed to the other directors.

Still on the sphere of racial issues, perhaps the most discomfiting bit is possibly when Tone Def is looking for a new career in the music industry after N.W.H.'s demise. He comes up with a new age style song called "I'm Just a Human Being" played with his new band, The New Human Formantics. As he says to Nina, at that moment he no longer believes in racial difference anymore and thinks everyone is the same. Tone eventually gets beaten up for this, leading N.W.H. to reunite afterwards, but also demonstrating that indeed there are differences that might never be surpassed.

Fear of a Black Hat was shot shortly after the Los Angeles riots of 1992. These riots were triggered by ethnic conflicts, and hence, with the violent images shown worldwide still fresh in people's minds, there was very little hope during those years that different people could effectively live together in peace. Had it concluded on a more positive note, perhaps the movie would have managed to extend beyond being a simple parody and could have offered new perspectives about the issues that it portrays. Instead, it simply concludes with an "eight months after" note, showing the band back together as it was profitable for all three of them, just as it happens at the end of *This Is Spinal Tap*.

In terms of structural characteristics, the film follows mostly the observational mode, the same as *This Is Spinal Tap* and *A Mighty*

Wind. Nonetheless, there are some sequences where this seems to be a bit blurred, and the movie appears to be more of a regular fiction than a mockumentary. The same occurs in *A Mighty Wind*, but in a more straightforward manner, and this will be analysed in its later section. In the case of *Fear of a Black Hat*, this blurring occurs in two scenes: first, when Tasty and Rabinow go to Ice Cold's hotel room and find him with Cheryl, and later in the scene where Tasty and Ice Cold visit Tone Def in the hospital. Nina is definitely not present in either one of those scenes, but she could have sent a cameraman to follow the band's every move. In fact, she makes comments about what happened as a narrator right after these scenes are presented. Whereas the presence of a cameraman is not fully acknowledged in any of those sequences⁷³, it is not entirely unlikely that someone could have been filming what was happening. Whatever the case may be, these scenes pose an issue for the filmic text as a mockumentary. Both scenes involve extremely private moments (the discovery of a betrayal and a hospital visit), and consequently, the presence of a camera would have been inappropriate. This might indicate that the mockumentary format has certain narrative limitations, and hence it is not always appropriate.

When *Fear of a Black Hat* was first released in 1994, the main aspect that film critics noticed and praised was its similarity to *This*

⁷³ In other scenes the camera is clearly acknowledged, such as when the band asks the crew to leave from wherever they are, shutting the door so they can privately beat someone up. This is what happens for instance in the Vanilla Sherbet scene.

Is Spinal Tap. Nevertheless, most reviews seem to agree that it is not as sharp as its predecessor. Roger Ebert, for example, compares them as follows:

“A truly uncompromising satire on this subject could probably not be filmed at this time, I suppose. You can almost feel "Fear of a Black Hat" pulling back in sensitive areas; going so far and no further. Nor does the movie really have much to say about the music itself - music which, like the heavy metal of "Spinal Tap," takes itself more seriously than anyone with common sense is likely to take it (rap and heavy metal are both more about attitudes than about melody). But the movie is funny and fresh, and filled with wicked little moments like the uneasy meeting of five or six rappers who all have "Ice" in their names”.⁷⁴

Edward George, in an article⁷⁵ published by *Sight & Sound* magazine, noted that the film does touch on many (then) contemporary racial/social and musical issues. In 2006, in a DVD review⁷⁶ for *The Digital Fix* website, Eamonn McCusker actually criticizes this characteristic, explaining that the film can only be fully enjoyed by those having considerable knowledge about the world of hip-hop, unlike *This Is Spinal Tap*, which is considered to

⁷⁴ EBERT, R., 1994. Fear of a Black Hat. *The Chicago Sun-Times*. Accessed on November 2012:

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19940617/REVIEWS/406170301/1023>

⁷⁵ GEORGE, E., 1994. *Beneath the Hats*. In: *Sight and Sound*, vol. 4, n°. 11, p. 26-27.

⁷⁶ Available at: <http://film.thedigitalfix.com/content/id/61800/fear-of-black-hat.html>

have more of a universal appeal. The film does feature numerous references to groups and specific events of the time. Amongst similarities and contrasts with other music mockumentaries, the main features of *Fear of a Black Hat* can be outlined as follows:

1. Issues of gender politics are approached, but in a more shameless manner than in *This Is Spinal Tap*, as rap lyrics tend to be more explicit on the subject.
2. The use of music videos is an integral part of the mock documentary “narrative”.
3. A direct criticism is made of “black cinema” texts that were contemporary to the film.
4. The film adheres mostly to the observational documentary mode, but in some moments uses visual conventions of regular fictions. Thus it is inferred that there may be some narrative limitations to the mockumentary format.
5. Violence is one of the core issues featured in the movie. This is indicative of the on-going racial struggle in the USA.
6. The film’s audience appeal is not very universal, since significant knowledge about the world of hip-hop is required in order more fully appreciate it.

Overall, *Fear of a Black Hat* stands out as a portrait of the musical genre that it depicts, as well as of the music industry's situation during its time. As described above, race, gender relations and violence are key components of the story. In terms of structure, it closely emulates the guidelines established in *This Is Spinal Tap*: the film director follows the band, investigating its highs and lows, through interviews and "fly-on-the-wall" style shots. A few other plot elements are also replicated here, such as the evil groupie character and the recurring comic death. As for differences, perhaps the most noticeable one is the use of music video clips as an integral part of the mock narrative. Most importantly, though shot in mockumentary style, the film allows the audience to take a wide and satirical look at a theme that had not been very deeply analysed previously and that was quite contemporary at the time. Therein lays its strength and merit. Unlike *All You Need Is Cash* and *A Mighty Wind*, works which mainly look to the past in order to scrutinize their subjects, *Fear of a Black Hat* depicts a situation that was very current at the time, and which somehow, 20 years later, still manages to reflect the universe of hip-hop music.

4.4. A Mighty Wind

A Mighty Wind was produced by the same group of people who made *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), *Best in Show* (2000) and *For Your Consideration* (2006). All of these are mockumentaries, and they were all directed by Christopher Guest,

with the exception of *This Is Spinal Tap*. It is relevant to note that *A Mighty Wind* is the only one (besides *Spinal Tap*, of course) having a music-related theme. The subjects featured in the others are miscellaneous: a small town theatre group hoping to make it big, dog show competitions, and a metafilm of sorts, in respective order. It can be assumed that Guest et al had become accustomed to this film format and decided to use it in different contexts, exploring its possibilities.

Guest began using this audiovisual format around the time that *Spinal Tap* was developed (1984). He and some of his co-workers (such as Martin Short and Harry Shearer) were cast members of *Saturday Night Live* for a while, and some of their sketches featured the fake documentary mode. One of them, for instance, followed (in a rather comical manner) two brothers who were training and fighting for the right of Male Synchronized Swimming to be featured in the official Olympic Games. The group reunited somewhat recently in a featurette for the 2012 Academy Awards, which might have actually been their last mockumentary together. Eugene Levy, one of the members of the group, recently discarded the possibility of their creating another film of this sort, stating that the genre has by now “played-out”⁷⁷.

A Mighty Wind tells the story of the reunion of three folk music groups that get together for an homage concert after the death of the

⁷⁷ See: http://blogs.indiewire.com/theplaylist/eugene-levy-says-no-more-christopher-guest-movies-are-planned-as-mock-doc-style-is-played-out-20120403?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter#.

record label owner who used to manage them in the 1960s. This was indeed a memorable decade for this musical genre, which proved to be an adequate vehicle for addressing the changes that were taking place in the world during this time. Acts like Peter, Paul and Mary, Simon and Garfunkel, and Bob Dylan were at the height of their careers at this period. Researchers such as Frith (1981) discuss this musical genre's characteristics and its influence on other genres such as rock and roll. The original folk music was derived from a traditional genre that distinguished itself from classic and popular music, amongst other reasons, due to its being considered a part of a certain culture, literally "the music of the people". For example, songs known by everyone but whose original author cannot be traced, passed on from generation to generation by oral tradition, are considered to be folk. This genre had its revival during that decade, this time with the certified authorship of artists such as Leonard Cohen. It became the appropriate genre for art performances ("happenings"), protest songs and long, poetry-inspired lyrics. Just as soul music was the most popular "black" music genre during the 1960s, folk is generally regarded to be the genre that was made and consumed by white university students during those years.

It is with this scenario in mind that the three bands from *A Mighty Wind* were combined together, being each quite different from the other. One of the groups is The New Main Street Singers, a new version of the original Main Street singers. The group is put together by the shameless manager Mike LaFontaine (Fred Willard)

with none of its original members. Some of its nine members include control freak Terry Bohner (John Michael Higgins) and his wife, former porn actress Laurie (Jane Lynch), and ex-junkie Sissy Knox (Parker Posey). LaFontaine knows that he can profit from the sense of nostalgia of those who were young in the 1960s when watching a band like this play again. He also knows that there is a market for contemporary youngsters who feel connected somehow to a past in which they never lived. One of the main traits of postmodernism is re-using elements from previous times in current contexts, thus creating a feeling of revival, or, in more fashionable terms, a sense of “retro” or “vintage”. Interestingly enough, this issue is addressed in the film, when members of another group, The Folksmen, discuss their wardrobe issues, saying they would look retro if they wore the same things that they wore in the past, although back then the look was obviously not considered to be retro, but rather, common. They then opt for using something more contemporary.

The Folksmen is a trio formed by Mark Shubb (Harry Shearer), Jerry Palter (Michael McKean) and Alan Burrows (Christopher Guest), who had met while studying at university. These are the same actors who played the band members of Spinal Tap, and again they composed the music in the film⁷⁸. This band was originally created in 1984 (around the same time of the *This Is Spinal Tap*

⁷⁸ Some of the songs were actually composed by other performers. “A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow”, was nominated for an Academy Award and it was composed by McKean and his wife, actress Annette O’Toole, who does not act in the movie.

release) for a *SNL* sketch, demonstrating that they may have had the idea for the movie years before it went into production. The trio seems to be happy about the reunion, which takes place decades later, with each of the members having followed different paths in their lives. The most mesmerizing case of change is that of Shubb, who in the end becomes a transgender woman, after some insinuations that he was very vain (for instance, taking special care of his hands).

The reunion concert is completed with the duo Mitch (Eugene Levy) and Mickey (Catherine O'Hara). The story of this duo seems to parallel that of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, who sang together for a while and had a tumultuous relationship, both professionally and romantically. It seemed unlikely that they would reunite, as Mitch Cohen had spent most of his post-fame years suffering from deep psychological problems due to his resentment against Mickey, who had broken up with him. As for Mickey Crabbe, she had become a housewife, married to a model train enthusiast and who has a boring (and rather scatological) job in the urinary catheters industry. The son of the deceased manager, Jonathan Steinbloom (Bob Balaban), eventually convinces Mitch to take part in the concert.

Jonathan is in many ways the leading character, as he is the one who comes up with the idea of the concert and who is in charge of everything. His father was Irving Steinbloom (Stuart Luce), a

character inspired by Harold Leventhal⁷⁹, who was the promoter of artists such as Bob Dylan and Harry Belafonte. Interestingly enough, Leventhal was still alive at the time of *A Mighty Wind*'s release⁸⁰, passing away in 2005, but a concert on his homage was indeed organized in 2003 at the Carnegie Hall, and it became a documentary in 2004, a film named *Isn't This a Time! A Tribute Concert for Harold Leventhal*, directed by Jim Brown⁸¹. The concert was held on the 29th of November of 2003, more than six months after the release of *A Mighty Wind*. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to assume that in this case it was actually the mockumentary that influenced the real documentary. This audiovisual mode was by then becoming so well-known that the process could actually be reversed.

Jonathan arranges for the concert to be held at Town Hall in New York, and to be transmitted by PBN (Public Broadcast Network, the mock version of the real American public channel, PBS). The head of this network, a Swedish named Lars Olfen (Ed Begley Jr.), is actually portrayed as being a big fan of folk music (he claims that he used to listen to it back in his childhood days in Sweden) and he

⁷⁹ Some sources argue though that the main inspiration for Irving Steinbloom's character was actually folk manager Albert Grossman. See for example INNES, J. 2004. *A Mighty Wind*. In: *Sight and Sound*, vol. 14, n^o. 2, p. 54.

⁸⁰ *Harold Leventhal, Promoter of Folk Music, Dies at 86* – obituary published at The New York Times in October 6th, 2005.

⁸¹ Another film directed by Jim Brown that might have inspired *A Mighty Wind* was the documentary *The Weavers: Wasn't That a Time* (1982), about the blacklisted band, which back then made a return concert at Carnegie Hall. See Roger Ebert's comment about this online at: <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20030416/REVIEWS/304160303/1023>

is willing to do everything he can to make the concert special, hoping, for instance, to have lots of moving cameras around the stage. He even comes up with the idea of turning it into a live event. Nonetheless, Olfen is faced with the budget limitations of his channel. It is assumed that the “real” documentary “A Mighty Wind” would result from the production, execution and aftermath of the concert, all to be recorded by the PBN crew. Another jest concerning Olfen is the fact that he frequently uses Yiddish expressions, possibly as a way to try to fit in with the Jewish community, Jonathan included. It is a well-known fact that there are many Jews in show business, hence Olfen’s attempt to sound Jewish is funny not just because it is exaggerated and inadequate, but because some people in real life who work in this field might really feel the need to adapt to this cultural niche.

Another step that Jonathan needs to face for putting together the concert is talking to his siblings. His sister Naomi (Debra Theaker) is overly emotional, and seems more than willing to make the concert happen. His brother Elliott (Don Lake) is very sceptical, and does not seem very keen to contribute. It is Jonathan’s duty to convince them and to make it all happen in the smoothest way possible. It is quite evident that he wants this concert to happen no matter what, as a sort of emotional debt that he must pay to his father. He even becomes overly concerned about minor details, such as the theatre decor, especially the flowers, letting everyone know that they might be dangerous when making his introduction speech.

A Mighty Wind uses resources similar to other musical mockumentaries, such as creating fake old images from “back in the day” when they were young that would have appeared on TV shows, or images from their album covers. They also use real images from that time period and re-contextualize them so that they become a part of the fake documentary. There are, for instance, shots from real folk music audiences, just as images of real Beatles’ fans were used in *All You Need is Cash*. This is an easy visual solution, but it may also evoke real feelings of nostalgia and show some sort of admiration for what is being portrayed, as those people had genuine feelings for what they were witnessing. When Jonathan Steinbloom and Lars Olfen discuss who would be the audience that would watch the concert, they reach the conclusion that their target audience would be not only the young people who may be interested learning about folk music, but also those who actually listened to these songs in the past.

While in *A Mighty Wind* the music industry seems to be criticized in general terms, the folk music genre itself is quite respected. There is an underlying reverence to the genre, shown for example when people mention the kiss that Mitch and Mickey shared when they sang “A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow” for the first time. Everyone’s impression was that it was very romantic, a moment of hope, a sign of changing times. In fact, one of the key moments of the film is when Mitch and Mickey sing together again and everybody expects them to kiss once more. Another example is the

song that all of the bands sing together at the end of the concert, and which shares the title with the film, “A Mighty Wind”. It is obviously a reference to Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind”, with its messages of peace and solidarity.

As for its criticism of the music industry, one of the key moments is when we are introduced to public relations professionals Wally Fenton and Amber Cole (Larry Miller and Jennifer Coolidge) who confess that they do not even like folk music, but that they are willing to promote anything for money. Criticism of music industry strategies is also shown in the actions of the manager Mike LaFontaine. He was once famous in the 1970s for having a catch phrase on a TV show (“Wha’ Happened”) and after the concert he decides that his way back into the world of television is to create a series with the New Main Street Singers. The absurd premise of the series is that the members of the band would be judges during the day and folk singers outside of work, and that they would all live together. This is shown in a “six months later” feature at the end of the “documentary”.

Another characteristic of *A Mighty Wind* (and other Guest & friends mockumentaries) is the use of improvisation⁸². Film critic David Edelstein from *Slate* magazine makes the following remark about the performers:

⁸² This is discussed in the DVD commentary of the film, featuring Christopher Guest and Eugene Levy.

“They come from the most ephemeral of forms – improvisational comedy, which makes small numbers of people deliriously happy but, unless they get a gig on a long-running sitcom, doesn't generate the kind of attention that opens doors in Hollywood. In three movies (plus *Spinal Tap*), Guest and his collaborators have found a form that at once accommodates their gifts and lets them revel in their fear of insignificance”⁸³.

Some of the cast members came from The Second City, the famous Chicago comedy improvisation troupe. One of the examples of the use of improvisation in the movie is when Mitch gets lost and they are searching for him and Mickey asks “Is there a cockfight arena near here?” Besides being a very funny line, it contributes information about the possible interests of Mitch. Catherine O’Hara, with all her talent, knows that the key to good improvisation is letting the ideas flow through methods of free association.

Improvising proves especially appropriate for the mockumentary format, as it implies some sort of spontaneity that is also common in real documentaries. That is not to say, of course, that mockumentaries do not follow a script, because they do. However, it is amusing to watch what happens when they let the performers interact freely with each other. Being a mockumentary which mainly follows the standards of the observational mode (filming the groups together during rehearsals, following their interactions,

⁸³ Available online at:
http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2003/04/tap_into_folk.single.html

letting them give testimonials with their version of the facts, etc.), *A Mighty Wind* benefits greatly from this device, which perhaps would have been harder to apply to an expository mode film, as in this case, the scenes selected must be more controlled. That is why there is no indication that *ad libitum* was used in *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*, for instance. As for *Fear of a Black Hat*, it can be assumed that improvisation was used in some of the scenes, due to its dialogue style. Nonetheless, there is no documented evidence to confirm this possibility⁸⁴.

A Mighty Wind might also have somehow been influenced by reality shows, which were gaining more and more notoriety around the time that the movie was being made. That is not to say that the same vulgar characteristics that are so common in this type of TV show are used in it. However, a certain similarity may be noticed in terms of structure. The fact that the documentary was being produced for a television channel in itself displays some similarity to reality TV. For instance, many of the scenes aim to show conflict between people, which is one of the key elements of reality shows. Conflict, of course, was seen in the other mockumentaries, but not in such an intrusive way. One example of this is when Jonathan Steinbloom is arguing with the events liaison from Town Hall, Lawrence E. Turpin (Michael Hitchcock). The camera coming in for a close up, the petty dialogues – all serve to highlight the disagreements. Conflict always draws public attention, therefore

⁸⁴ Unlike in the cases of *This Is Spinal Tap* and *A Mighty Wind* where the creators have asserted the use of improvisation in various interviews and DVD commentaries.

making more profits for television channels. Further evidence of the influence of reality TV is the strong case that is made for the concert to be shown live, as it would be more thrilling since many things may go wrong in a live show. It is well-known that musical reality TV shows profit significantly from live exhibitions, as they may capture “real” reactions and emotions, and thus further engage the audience.

The main characteristic setting *A Mighty Wind* apart from other music mockumentaries is possibly the fact that some parts of it do not appear to be a mockumentary at all. These parts look like any other fictional movie. This is the case in the scenes involving Mitch, perhaps because he is a very unpredictable character. An example of this is when he arrives on a bus to meet Mickey for the first time in years. Mitch comes out of the bus and seems lost and completely unaware that there might be a cameraman waiting for him. Of course this does not necessarily imply that there was not a documentary crew waiting for him at the station, they could have been there and perhaps Mitch simply would not have noticed them. Nevertheless, a scene like this is rather atypical in mockumentaries, which tend to be quite self-referential. In fact, a difference can be established between omnipresence in regular fiction and omnipresence in mockumentaries. Whereas in usual fictions this omnipresence is usually complete (as in, we follow the characters in their most intimate moments and thoughts), in mockumentaries this full presence is never achieved. Moreover, as in documentaries, subjects tend to behave “for the camera” and not as if they are

talking to each other privately, or lost in deep thought. That is not to say that documentaries (or mockumentaries, for that matter) cannot achieve some sort of truth, some level of honesty; they are, however, bound somehow to the limitations implied by the format itself. Even in those films which are quite *cinéma vérité*, there is a sense of an underlying self-consciousness that regular fiction lacks. Ironically, in this sense fictional works might be even more realistic than documentaries.

Some other examples of this are seen when Mitch, Mickey and her husband are having lunch together at the couple's house and when Mitch gets lost during the concert. Had it been a normal documentary, the camera would have followed Mitch throughout his journey outside of Town Hall. Instead, we only see him leaving, and then a bit of what he was doing outside. Again, he seems unaware of the camera (if there was one nearby), and we only see him staring off into the colourful lights of a Manhattan evening. After much despair of Mickey, Steinbloom and Olfen, Mitch eventually comes back with a rose for Mickey. He merely says: "it was really hard to find a good one". Interestingly enough we do not see him looking for the flower, neither in a regular fiction format nor in the way that a mockumentary would do – this is completely unforeseen by the audience. Nonetheless, this type of ellipsis is more common in regular fictions than in fake documentaries, precisely because the element of surprise is a common narrative trait. Although mockumentaries also tend to follow a narrative

structure, they rarely utilize the storytelling tools that are so common in normal fiction, such as this one.



Figure 9: Mitch gets “lost”. One of the moments in *A Mighty Wind* that might have not followed the “rules” of mockumentaries.

This might imply that depending on the type of story being told, the mockumentary mode may not be the most adequate one. Whenever self-awareness compromises the narrative effectiveness, for instance, common fiction will prove to be more adequate. As stated above, in the case of a character like Mitch, who seems to be undergoing deep mental and emotional disorientation, the mockumentary format could be limited to showing us only part of his madness, and not all of its unpredictable variations.

A Mighty Wind was released in the 2003, when the mockumentary format was no longer a novelty. Most critics mentioned this aspect

when the film was released. Also, most of them commented that unlike *This Is Spinal Tap*, *A Mighty Wind* is actually very respectful to the musical genre that it depicts. A. O. Scott, from *The New York Times*, writes about this in his review⁸⁵. He also noted that, strangely enough, the film lacks political commentary. This is incongruous with the fact that politics were one of the main subjects of 1960s folk music. David Edelstein makes a similar observation in his review for *Slate* magazine⁸⁶. Both critics agree that the outcome is then simply a parody which is actually fond of its subject, and hence, not as funny as previously made music mockumentaries. This is why *A Mighty Wind* should be classified as a degree 1 mock text. Roger Ebert, in his review for *The Chicago Sun-Times*, ratifies the argument of it being a mild parody by claiming that: “Guest is rather fond of his characters. He didn't hate his targets in “Best in Show” or “Spinal Tap,” but he skewered them mercilessly, while the key characters in “A Mighty Wind”, especially Levy and O'Hara, take on a certain weight of complexity and realism that edges away from comedy and toward sincere soap opera”⁸⁷. This sympathy/pity towards its characters is indeed one of the main characteristics of the film.

Like most music mockumentaries, *A Mighty Wind* is also full of small details that create an overall scenario that is very telling about

⁸⁵ Available online at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/16/movies/16WIND.html>

⁸⁶ http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2003/04/tap_into_folk.single.html

⁸⁷ Available online at:

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20030416/REVIEWS/304160303/1023>

the music industry and the genre. Here are some other events from film that are worth mentioning:

- The PR representatives organize a party (something that also happens in *This Is Spinal Tap*) to promote the concert/memorial “Ode to Irving”. They also arrange for the bands to go to a music store to autograph their albums for fans, a very common promotion practice nowadays⁸⁸. However, these events seem to be heartless, only for commercial purposes, and not intended to encourage youth to get to know more about folk.
- Jonathan Steinbloom is portrayed as an overly-organized, overprotected child, and control freak man, who is on a mission to keep his father’s legacy alive. A homage concert is a good way for this format to approach a “family problems” theme.
- The Bohner couple (from the New Main Street Singers) follow a strange religion based on the vibration of colours. Their rituals are hilarious, especially when we think there are indeed people out there who believe in the most exotic creeds.
- During the concert there are quite a few audience shots, focusing in particular on the reactions from Jonathan’s sister Naomi. This is a way to get feedback about the audience’s reactions to what is going on stage. Audience takes from The Folksmen’s

⁸⁸ In *This Is Spinal Tap* the band also goes to a music shop to meet the fans and sign autographs, but things go even worse, as nobody shows up.

sing-along song are particularly funny.



Figure 10: one of the shots capturing the audience's reactions in *A Mighty Wind*.

- The mockumentary features a music critic, the manager of a magazine specializing in folk music. This participation is probably a nod to the fact that in documentaries, an authority figure with added knowledge is always brought in to speak and thereby confirm a point that is trying to be made by the film.

- The Folksmen got one of their songs (the beautiful “Never Did No Wanderin’”) “stolen” by the New Main Street Singers, who play it before them in the concert. While this was apparently not intentional, The Folksmen get very upset (albeit pretending later on that they did not even hear it), mainly because they feel that the New Main Street Singers have “butchered” their song. They have to improvise and come up with something else at the last moment – although the pathetic possibility of repeating the same song again is

initially considered.

- The conclusion with its “six months after” feature is also very comic: The Folksmen are playing in a Casino in Las Vegas (with Shubbs now in his female version), The New Main Street Singers have become a TV series, and Mickey is singing a song about catheters in a fair for urinary products, while Mitch says he has been in a very prolific phase and happy about it (even though he keeps squeezing his stress ball). It is funny to see how each part of the duo has a different version of what the kiss they shared during the concert meant, always claiming that the other got confused, that it did not mean anything, but that the other member had become obsessed, claiming that each was in love again.

A Mighty Wind in many ways also serves as a lesson of what folk music used to be. Nowadays folk music is different, as contemporary R&B is not the same today as it was in its early days. Current folk music is more related to an “indie” niche of market, which seems more concerned about the image that they are trying to portray than actually stating something meaningful. That is not to say that previous folk music did not have any commercial purposes. It did, but it was also truly representative of a generation that had ideals and was fighting for change. Whether musically they were always good or not is another issue.

As a mockumentary, the film is remarkable for somehow advancing the mode into the XXI century’s overuse of “reality” techniques and

into the music industry context, with all of its revivals (reuses) of genres. Soul music for instance has shown another surge in popularity over recent years. Instead of Motown artists, British singers such as Amy Winehouse, Joss Stone and Adele came around to reclaim its legacy. Whether or not this influence is good or bad is perhaps to be determined by each consumer.

Here is a recapitulation of the main characteristics of *A Mighty Wind*:

1. The film evokes feelings of nostalgia. Even though the main event of the story is a concert that takes place in contemporary times, there is a constant sense of reliving a lost long era. One of the tools utilized to conjure those revival connotations was to fake archival footage, a practice also widely utilized in *The Rutles* film.

2. Apart from the aforementioned usage of archival footage, the film adheres mainly to an observational mode, just as *This Is Spinal Tap* and *Fear of a Black Hat*.

3. At some points, the film narrative seems to drop the visual codes of a mockumentary text and follow more traditional fiction conventions. This might indicate that there are some limitations to the mock format.

4. As it is sympathetic to the subject that it portrays, *A Mighty Wind* is actually a degree 1 mockumentary (parody), unlike the other

three scrutinized examples, which stick to degree 2 (critique). Some critics have therefore claimed that the film is not as acerbic as other mockumentaries, even though it is still considered funny and enjoyable to watch.

5. The film was released at a time when mockumentaries were no longer a novelty, hence it is constructed in a somewhat formulaic manner, no longer a surprise to the audiences. It also might have been “contaminated” by reality TV practices.

6. Just as *This Is Spinal Tap*, the movie relies greatly on improvisation. Improvising does not always need to have a comic outcome⁸⁹, but it certainly does so in those two films. Christopher Guest and his associates came from a comedy improvisation background, and in the mockumentary mode they found the perfect means to highlight their skills. This might be one of the reasons why they have repeatedly used this format in their films, instead of making more traditional style fictions.

Each of the mockumentaries analysed in this research comes from a different decade (and thus different contexts), and they also portray very different subjects. Each has its own peculiarities, although all of them talk about facets of the music industry and its genres, amongst other similarities. It is to be wondered what could be the

⁸⁹ As David Edelstein notes in his article, directors such as John Cassavetes, Robert Altman and Mike Leigh have also used this resource, without necessarily having a comic purpose. See: http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2003/04/tap_into_folk.single.html

next step (if any) for mockumentaries related to music. Perhaps there could be a mockumentary featuring a fake singing contest, just as in real life we have *American Idol* and similar programmes? If ever made, would that be a commentary on how bad these shows generally are, or would it be an easy way to get the public's attention? Contemporary audiences are used to this format without necessarily extracting any criticism out of it. The answers remain to be seen. Whatever the case may be, *A Mighty Wind* seems to end a cycle initiated by *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash*. It closes this cycle in a very noble way, paying reverence to the genre that it depicts but also criticizing those whose only aim is to profit from it.

5. CONCLUSIONS

After all that has been considered, some conclusions may be drawn about mockumentaries related to the music industry. To begin with, it was established that the mockumentary mode arose as an alternative to the rules of both the documentary genre and traditional fiction. General ideas drawn from the works of Bill Nichols about documentaries and from Craig Hight and Jane Roscoe about mock texts were used in order to comprehend both audiovisual styles in broader terms. Amongst other assertions, Hight and Roscoe determine three degrees of mock texts, based on the levels of criticism that they would imply. More recently (2006), Roscoe, this time in collaboration with Steven N. Lipkin and Derek Paget, approached the subject once again. They recap some key concepts about mock documentaries in the following way:

- they appropriate documentary's aesthetics to create a fictional world thereby serving the direct relationship between the image and the referent;
- they take as their object of parody both the documentary as a screen form, documentary practitioners, and cultural, social and political icons,
- they seek to develop a relationship with the knowing audience who through being in on the joke can appreciate both the humor and the inherent critical reflexivity of the form" (2006, p. 14).

With that in mind, it can be inferred that mockumentaries use documentary codes in a fictional context, and that they are more

effective to audiences who are knowledgeable about the referent texts that they draw from. Although they use codes from the documentary genre, mockumentaries are also operative as fictions, among other reasons, because they tend to stick to a three act, linear structure, with a determined relationship between cause and effect of events.

It was also demonstrated through examples (from television series and some of the cinematic mockumentaries mentioned) that the visual conventions of documentary may have some dramatic limitations, hence some of the texts also borrow visual codes from normal fictions at certain points in their narratives. It was also acknowledged that currently the mockumentary format seems to be a trend, especially in television series, but that might be more due to the influence of reality television than the original mockumentaries per se. The origin of music mockumentaries was also traced, and then the relationships between this format and musicals, rockumentaries, comedies and other comparable texts (such as TV series featuring fictional bands) were discussed. Some peculiarities and current issues regarding the music industry have also been addressed, and for that, the work of sociologist Simon Frith proved very valuable.

Moving on to the case studies, four films were analyzed. In their chosen order, those were: *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Fear of a Black Hat* and *A Mighty Wind*. It was shown that in the case of *The Rutles*, The Beatles movies and real life

events were the main sources, making the film a clear parody of Beatlemania. It was also mentioned that despite moments of reverence towards what it portrays, the film is at some points very critical to its subject. Therefore it may be classified as degree 2 (critique) on the Hight and Roscoe scheme. It is also to be noted that *The Rutles* adheres to the rules of what Bill Nichols identified as expository mode of documentary, unlike the other three examples, which tend to stick mostly to the observational mode.

This Is Spinal Tap is usually considered the quintessential music mockumentary, so comments about it will be left for the final conclusion. *Fear of a Black Hat* has a structure that is very similar to *Spinal Tap*, except that hip-hop is the music style depicted and the themes are quite different. In *Fear of a Black Hat*, racism is a main subject, and so, consequently, is violence. Being a product of the 1990s, the film also makes great use of music video clips within its narrative. As for other similarities with *This Is Spinal Tap*, both films deal with sexism, albeit in different ways. As Frith points out (1983, p. 85), sexism is indeed a recurrent theme in the music industry. In fact, both films could actually be seen as condoning sexism, since they feature female characters that do not seem to have any redeeming qualities (Jeanine and Cheryl). However, given the double entendre nature of mockumentaries in general and other indications from the texts, perhaps their creators' intention was actually to criticize sexism.

As for *A Mighty Wind*, it is an example of a more recent text and the aforementioned possible narrative limitations of the mockumentary mode, since it seems at times, to be a “hybrid”, sometimes using visual codes that are more aligned with regular fictions. The film also seems to be the one that pays the most respect to the music genre that it depicts (folk music), even though it is still critical to certain practices of the music industry. Hence, on the scale established by Hight and Roscoe, the film would be a degree 1, where the intentions are simply to make a parody of what is being mocked.

This Is Spinal Tap is considered the fundamental music mockumentary because it is constructed in a very effective way, giving the film universal appeal, despite the fact that it scrutinizes with great accuracy a specific music style, heavy metal. As Ethan De Seife puts it, “*This is Spinal Tap* did not invent the mock documentary, but it did grant the form a far greater cultural currency than it had ever achieved” (2007, p. 103). Of course this is also due to the fact that the band gained “real” life through concerts, album releases, more audiovisual products and a solid fan base. About that, De Seife quotes Christopher Guest in his book (extracted from the movie’s DVD commentary – 1998 release):

“What we’ve seen... when we’ve played live recently is that people want to feel as if they’re part of the movie. Because they were the audience watching this movie, the audience that comes to the show – this sort of is a circular thing – feel as if they are now in the movie. And it’s very hard to separate. It’s a very bizarre

phenomenon that's hard to explain... Are they joking, or do they know that we're...? At what point does this become real or imagined?" (2007, p. 104)

Therefore, the film's cult status contributed immensely to the life of Spinal Tap outside of the fictional sphere. As previously described, this might be because audiences are willing to prolong the movie experience, even if they know that everything is fictitious. This is very telling regarding the power of mockumentaries, since it would be very unlikely that a traditional fiction film would have such an impact on audiences. The mock reality format allows for a certain affinity to the subject that usually does not exist in other types of film. This was also demonstrated previously when comparing music mockumentaries to other music fictions, such as *The Wonders – That Thing You Do*, where the band portrayed had a song that was a hit in real life, but since they were simply actors doing their jobs in a sheer fictional universe, there were no intentions to carry on with the experience.

Thus, in reference to the questions proposed in the first chapter, here are some possible answers:

- The relationship between mockumentaries and the music industry is indeed somewhere in between direct criticism and flattery (here understood in the ambiguous sense of adulation, rather than sheer praise). The critique is generally focused on commercial aspects of this sector of the culture industry, while the musical

aspects are at times praised and at other times criticized. As stated above, in the case of *A Mighty Wind* folk music, for instance, is clearly valued, whereas in the case of *The Rutles*, *Spinal Tap* and *Fear of a Black Hat* respectively, some traits of Beatlemania, heavy metal and rap culture are attacked. This tension between flattery and direct critique is so symptomatic of the mockumentary mode that Hight and Roscoe established their degrees scheme. As stated before, this investigation classifies *The Rutles*, *Spinal Tap* and *Fear of a Black Hat* as degree 2 mockumentaries (critique) while *A Mighty Wind* would be degree 1 (parody).

- Degree 3 implies deconstruction, not only of the subjects portrayed by the mock texts but also of the documentary genre per se. None of the films scrutinized in more depth here could be categorized as degree 3, as they tend to focus on the selected music genres rather than the documentary genre itself. They do include some degree of criticism to documentaries (especially to rockumentaries, in this case), but never to the extent of other films that clearly intend to question documentary practices, such as *David Holzman's Diary*.

- Mockumentaries are designed for a knowing audience, people who will enjoy the texts more fully if they know the referents drawn upon. However, it may be argued that in cases such as *This Is Spinal Tap*, the film became somewhat universal to general issues of the music industry and hence a great knowledge about hard rock, for example, is not entirely necessary in order to enjoy the movie.

Obviously, the more the audience knows, the better, but there is still some degree of understanding possible even without having a broad knowledge of the subject, and so the film, in a way, stands on its own, as it creates new meanings independently of previous works. In fact, there is another (lower) level of understanding: in the case of films such as *This Is Spinal Tap*, some people got confused when first seeing it, thinking it was all real. One of the reasons why this happened was because the cast was not widely known at the time of the film's release, thus audiences did not for instance, have the reference of who was Christopher Guest. In fact, even today he might be more known as Nigel Tufnel rather than for aspects of his personal life, such as being married to Jamie Lee Curtis. In the later mockumentaries made by Guest et al, this possibility diminished since probably most of the people watching them already knew his previous work and the cast from *This Is Spinal Tap*. Either way, that demonstrates that mockumentaries are more meaningful to audiences who are "in the know", but that those films can still be somewhat enjoyable on their own, even if this implies in some level of confusion – especially in the case of the hoaxes.

- Mockumentaries tend to follow narrative patterns, even though they borrow from the visual codes of documentary filmmaking. This demonstrates how mockumentaries are still very much inscribed as fictions, but on the other hand it can be argued that one of the reasons why this happens is because many documentaries *also* establish some sort of narrative, even if that does not happen as clearly as it does in traditional fictions.

- Even though musicals, rockumentaries and other types of music-related fictions deal with the music industry universe as well, they do not achieve the same degree of effectiveness as mockumentaries. This is possibly because they lack some of the core characteristics of the mock texts. Some of these characteristics are noticeable in all of the four main examples featured here. One example is the freedom of recreating real life events without the boundaries of factuality that typically constrain documentaries. A mockumentary can easily swap names, make actions more hyperbolic than in real life, or even add an extra sense of irony to occurrences, especially for comic purposes. Another commonality shared by mock texts is that they are always directly or indirectly alluding to the fact that they are fake, calling into question other audiovisual practices. Due to such characteristics, mockumentaries are frequently not only more entertaining but also more thought-provoking than the other types of texts.

- Consequently, there are different possible explanations as to why the filmmakers chose the mockumentary format to portray their subjects rather than proper documentaries or normal fictions. Each case must be evaluated individually. In the case of *The Rutles*, it could be because making a parody about The Beatles would be funnier than a normal documentary or a fictionalized version of their lives, but also because this way the creators could avoid legal problems. As for *Spinal Tap*, as previously mentioned, it managed to construct a universal text about the music industry, while also

depicting the world of heavy metal. Had it been a fiction or a documentary about a specific band, perhaps its appeal would not be so wide. *Fear of a Black Hat* draws greatly from *This Is Spinal Tap*, but besides that, making a film about rap that was not inscribed in the so-called “black cinema”, which gained some notoriety in the late 1980s/early 1990s (and that is, in fact, criticized in the film), was indeed innovative and derogatory to these “black cinema” practices. As for *A Mighty Wind*, it is a film that at some points uses normal fiction codes, so, as previously mentioned, it demonstrates some of the limitations of the mockumentary mode. However, the film still works very well as a mock text because it allows the story to play with archival images and concepts of nostalgia and revival, and for those aspects a full normal fiction probably would not have been as effective.

As already mentioned, current times are bringing even more mock vs. reality (as well as mock *and* reality) practices. It is to be assumed therefore, that more music related mockumentaries will continue to be made in the future and thus, this thesis cannot establish definitive parameters. The main intention was to find some of the most remarkable traits and to demonstrate why music seems to have an affinity with the mockumentary format. Music, as one of the main sources of mass consumption (especially amongst youngsters), and as a cultural practice, had to be one of the subjects depicted by fake documentaries. The reason why this has happened fairly often may be precisely because of the fact that the mockumentary mode allows for creators and audiences to establish

a closer connection with the subject by borrowing from the codes attributed to documentaries. As described, in relation to music, this closeness can evoke feelings of nostalgia, praise, criticism and fun, among others. Most importantly, the issue of what is true or not becomes somewhat irrelevant, as for the audience, if the experience of watching a mockumentary (or any film, for that matter) is meaningful enough, then what has been viewed becomes a part of their lives, through their memories and imagination, and therefore, it *is* real.

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- News about writing credits in documentaries, last accessed on October 2012:
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/26/movies/the-rise-of-writing-credits-in-documentaries.html?_r=0
- Audio for the *War of the Worlds* “prank” by Orson Welles. Accessed on July 2012:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs0K4ApWl4g>

8. FILMS AND TV SERIES

[Rec] (2007). Directed by Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza.

2ge+her: The Movie (2000). Directed by Nigel Dick.

2ge+her: The Series (2000). Created by Brian and Mark Gunn.

9 Songs (2004). Directed by Michael Winterbottom.

24 Hour Party People (2002). Directed by Michael Winterbottom.

30 Rock (2006 – 2013). Created by Tina Fey.

42nd Street (1933). Directed by Lloyd Bacon.

A Hard Day's Night (1964). Directed by Richard Lester.

A Mighty Wind (2003). Directed by Christopher Guest.

A Spinal Tap Reunion: The 25th Anniversary London Sell-Out. Directed by Jim Di Bergi (possibly a pseudonym for either Rob Reiner or Christopher Guest).

A Star is Born (1954). Directed by George Cukor.

Across the Universe (2007). Directed by Julie Taymor.

American Idol (2002-...). Created by Simon Fuller.

Almost Famous (2000). Directed by Cameron Crowe.

Anvil: The Story of Anvil (2008). Directed by Sacha Gervasi.

An American in Paris (1951). Directed by Vincente Minelli.

Bad News Tour (1983). Created by Adrian Edmondson as one of the episodes of the British TV series *The Comic Strip Presents...*,

broadcasted by Channel 4 and created by comedy troupe The Comic Strip.

Best in Show (2000). Directed by Christopher Guest.

Blair Witch Project (1999). Directed by Daniel Myric and Eduardo Sánchez.

Bob Roberts (1994). Directed by Robert Altman.

Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit of Glorious Nation of Kazakshtan (2006). Directed by Larry Charles.

Brüno (2009). Directed by Larry Charles.

Caméra Café (2001-...). Created by Bruno Solo, Yvan Le Bolloc'h and Alain Kappauf.

Cannibal Holocaust (1980). Directed by Ruggero Deodato.

CB4 (1993). Directed by Tamra Davis.

Citizen Kane (1941). Directed by Orson Welles.

Cocksucker Blues (1972). Directed by Robert Frank.

Cover Girl (1944). Directed by Charles Vidor.

Crossfire Hurricane (2012). Directed by Bret Morgen.

Crossroads (1986). Directed by Walter Hill.

Curb Your Enthusiasm (2000-...). Created by Larry David.

Da Ali G Show (2000 – 2004). Created by Sacha Baron Cohen.

David Holzmans Diary (1967). Directed by Jim McBride.

De-Lovely (2004). Directed by Irwin Winkler.

Dirty Dancing (1987). Directed by Emile Ardolino.

Easy Rider (1969). Directed by Dennis Hopper.

Exit Through The Gift Shop (2010). Directed by Banksy.

ER (1994 – 2009). Created by Michael Crichton.

Fear of Black Hat (1994). Directed by Rusty Cundieff.

Flying Down to Rio (1933). Directed by Thornton Freeland.

Footloose (1984). Directed by Herbert Ross.

For Your Consideration (2006). Directed by Christopher Guest.

Forgotten Silver (1995). Directed by Costa Botes and Peter Jackson.

Friday Night Lights (2006 – 2011). Created by Peter Berg.

Get Ready to Be Boyzvoiced (2000). Directed by Espen Eckbo, Henrik Elvestad and Mathis Fürst.

George Harrison: Living in the Material World (2011). Directed by Martin Scorsese.

Gimmer Shelter (1970). Directed by Charlotte Zwerin, and Albert and David Maysles.

Glee (2009-...). Created by Ian Brennan, Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy.

Gone with the Wind (1939). Directed by Victor Fleming.

Grease (1978). Directed by Randal Kleiser.

I'm Not There (2007). Directed by Todd Haynes.

I'm Still Here (2010). Directed by Casey Affleck.

Isn't This a Time! A Tribute Concert for Harold Leventhal (2004). Directed by Jim Brown.

Jesus Christ Superstar (1973). Directed by Norman Jewison.

Hair (1979). Directed by Milos Forman.

Hard Core Logo (1996). Directed by Cruce McDonald.

Head (1968). Directed by Bob Rafelson.

Help! (1965). Directed by Richard Lester.

High School Musical (2006). Directed by Kenny Ortega.

Jailhouse Rock (1957). Directed by Richard Thorpe.

Jazz on a Summer's Day (1959). Directed by Aram Avakiam and Bert Stern.

Land Without Bread (1933). Directed by Luis Buñuel.

Leningrad Cowboys Go America (1989). Directed by Aki Kaurismäki.

Madonna: Truth or Dare (1991). Directed by Alek Keshishian.

Magical Mystery Tour (1967). Directed by The Beatles and Bernard Knowles.

Man Bites Dog (C'est arrivé près de chez vous), 1992). Directed by Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel and Benoît Poelvoorde.

Mamma Mia! (2008). Directed by Phyllida Lloyd.

Mary Poppins (1964). Directed by Robert Stevenson.

Mean Streets (1973). Directed by Martin Scorsese.

Meet in Saint Louis (1944). Directed by Vincente Minnelli.

Metallica: Some Kind of Monster (2004). Directed by Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky.

Modern Family (2009-...). Created by Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd.

Monty Python's Flying Circus (1969 – 1974). Created by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975). Directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones.

Muriel's Wedding (1994). Directed by P.J. Hogan.

My Fair Lady (1964). Directed by George Cukor.

Nanook of the North (1922). Directed by Robert J. Flaherty.

Nashville (1975). Directed by Robert Altman.

Night and Day (1946). Directed by Michael Curtiz.

On the Town (1949). Directed by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly.

Once (2006). Directed by John Carney.

Orchestra Rehearsal (*Prova d'orchestra*, 1978). Directed by Federico Fellini.

Paranormal Activity (2007). Directed by Oren Peli.

Parks and Recreation (2009-...). Created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur.

Ricky Gervais meets... Christopher Guest (2006). Created by Ricky Gervais.

Rock 'n' Roll High School (1979). Directed by Allan Arkush and Joe Dante.

Rutland Weekend Television (1975 – 1976). Created by Eric Idle.

School of Rock (2003). Directed by Richard Linklater.

Shine a Light (2008). Directed by Martin Scorsese.

Singin' in the Rain (1952). Directed by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly.

South Park (1997-...). Created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone.

Spärhusen (2009 – 2010). Web series created by Ileana Douglas.

Spinal Tap: the Final Tour (1998). Directed by Rob Reiner.

Star Wars (1977, 1980, 1983, 2002, 2005, 2008). Created by George Lucas.

Stoned (2005). Directed by Stephen Woolley.

Stonehenge: 'Tis a Magic Place' (2009). Director uncredited, assumed to have been Christopher Guest.

Stop Making Sense (1984). Directed by Jonathan Demme.

Sympathy for the Devil (1968). Directed by Jean-Luc Godard.

Take the Money and Run (1969). Directed by Woody Allen.

Tenacious D: The Greatest Band on Earth (1997 – 2000). Created by Jack Black, Kyle Glass, David Cross and Bob Onderkirk.

Tenacious D in the Pick of Destiny (2006). Directed by Liam Lynch.

The Graduate (1967). Directed by Mike Nichols.

The Simpsons (1989-...). Created by Matt Groening.

The Weavers: Wasn't That a Time (1982). Directed by Jim Brown.

The Commitments (1991). Directed by Alan Parker.

The Falls (1980). Directed by Peter Greenaway.

The Glenn Miller Story (1954). Directed by Anthony Mann.

The Heavenly Kings (2006). Directed by Daniel Wu.

The Impossibles (1996). Produced by Hanna-Barbera

The Jazz Singer (1927). Directed by Alan Crossland.

The Last Waltz (1978). Directed by Martin Scorsese.

The Monkees (1966 – 1968). Created by Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider.

The Naked Brothers Band: The Movie (2005). Directed by Polly Draper.

The Naked Brothers Band (2006). Created by Polly Draper.

The Office (2001 – 2003). British version created by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant.

The Office (2005 – 2013). American version created by Ricky Gervais, Stephen Merchant and Greg Daniels.

The Partridge Family (1970 – 1974). Created by Bernard Slade.

The Real World (1992-...). Created by Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975). Directed by Jim Sharman.

The Rutles: All You Need is Cash (1978). Directed by Eric Idle and Gary Weis.

The Sound of Music (1965). Directed by Robert Wise.

The Wizard of Oz (1939). Directed by Victor Fleming.

The Wonders - That Thing You Do! (1996). Directed by Tom Hanks.

This is Spinal Tap (1984). Directed by Rob Reiner. The DVD edition released in 2009 was the one used as main reference, instead of other versions.

Tommy (1975). Directed by Ken Russel.

Velvet Goldmine (1998). Directed by Todd Haynes.

Waiting for Guffman (1996). Directed by Christopher Guest.

West Side Story (1961). Directed by Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise.

Woodstock (1970). Directed by Michael Wadleigh.

Yellow Submarine (1968). Directed by George Dunning.

Zelig (1983). Directed by Woody Allen.