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IT’S NOT ONLY ROCK AND ROLL: ‘ROCKUMENTARY’, DIRECT CINEMA, AND PERFORMATIVE DISPLAY.

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Abstract: The documentary form commonly referred to as rockumentary has become, since its inception in the early 1960s, a staple of American direct cinema. In keeping with its associations with observational direct cinema, rockumentary emphasizes showing over telling; that is, rockumentary privileges the visual capacities of documentary over patterns of exposition. While the ‘documentary display’ of rockumentary is comparable to certain features of the early ‘cinema of attractions’ it exceeds such features in its focus on performance. Typically, an emphasis within documentary theory on unmediated and unreconstructed access to the real as the basis of documentary film has not admitted a place for notions of performance before the camera. Rockumentary, with its relentless foregrounding of the performing body and the performance of musicians, revises this understanding. This essay examines rockumentary within the context of direct cinema as a mode centred on a documentary performative display as it operates within selected works from the 1960s to the present. The film theorist Brian Winston has claimed that ‘[d]irect cinema made the rock performance/tour movie into the most popular and commercially viable documentary form thus far.’ The inverse of this assessment may be closer to the mark: the rockumentary turned direct cinema into a commercially and widely available form, one which the rockumentary has at times returned to and superseded in its scopic attention to performative display.

The documentary form popularly referred to as rockumentary has become, since its inception in the early 1960s, a staple of nonfiction film production. The growth of the form has been enhanced by the fact that various Hollywood and independent directors not routinely associated with documentary film have produced works in this category, among them Hal Ashby (Let’s Spend the Night Together, 1984), Jonathan Demme (Stop Making Sense, 1984), Jim Jarmusch (Year of the Horse, 1998), Martin Scorsese (The Last Waltz, 1978), and Gillian Armstrong (Hard to Hold, 1986). However, despite (or because of) its enduring popular and commercial success, rockumentary has received scant critical attention within analyses of documentary film. In the infrequent instances when rockumentary is mentioned in film and television history it is, typically, isolated as a moment within the broader history of American direct cinema. In this way the influential film historians Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell have argued that rockumentary is ‘[t]he most widespread use of Direct Cinema’, and Brian Winston has noted that the ‘hand-held casual
aesthetic of Direct Cinema meshed perfectly with the anarchic oppositional world of rock. The relative absence of critical assessments of rockumentary is especially curious given the fact that many of the most notable works in the subgenre, including *Don't Look Back* (1966), *Monterey Pop* (1968), and *Gimme Shelter* (1970), were made by filmmakers prominently associated with the early phase of direct cinema, notably D.A. Pennebaker (*Don't Look Back* and *Monterey Pop*) and the Maysles brothers (*Monterey Pop* and *Gimme Shelter*).

Commentators have recently attended to the proliferation of observational reality TV and so-called popular factual entertainment by noting the bases of these forms in the observational mode of direct cinema. Overlooked in the findings of such revisionism, however, is the fact that direct cinema has not completely dissipated into television 'reality' programs, but rather continues to be deployed, in mutated forms, in the rockumentary. That current forms of rockumentary rely on a variant of direct cinema suggests that a 'pure' direct cinema once existed, and indeed early practitioners of direct cinema based many of their claims for its efficacy on notions of an 'unperverted' form of unmediated observation, and, according to the practitioners of direct cinema, it was this characteristic which marked the difference between American direct cinema and French cinéma vérité.

Beyond the realm of non-fiction cinema, the rise of the rockumentary can be positioned in relation to the fate of the Hollywood studio system and the genres it maintained. Beginning in the early 1960s (with what was, arguably, the first example of the form, the Maysles brothers *What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A.*, 1964) direct cinema studies of rock musicians came at a time when established Hollywood genres were showing signs of exhaustion. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that Hollywood's traditional genres - notably the western and the musical - did not, in the short term at least, survive the demise of the studio system. Attempts during the 1960s to revive such genres often met with disaster (and the fate of the execrable *Paint Your Wagon*, 1969, exemplifies the possible consequences resulting from a melding of the western and the musical into a cross-generic hybrid). The combined circumstances - decline of the studio system, and the impact of this situation on established filmic genres, in particular the musical - left a generic void which was filled by the rockumentary which, as David James notes, 'savagely reinvented the musical as genre'.

The new form, in keeping with its associations with observational direct cinema, emphasized showing not telling; that is, rockumentary privileges a scopic regime over patterns of exposition such as voice-over and interviews. Critics have argued that as a result of this stance, direct cinema (and by implication rockumentary) fails to situate subjects within
sociological or historical contexts, thereby contradicting the documentary project’s emphasis on providing information and inspiring knowledge. The position is overstated, as the case of rockumentary demonstrates. Rockumentary maintains a commitment to the traditional documentary project within a focus on youth subcultures and music sub-formations, and attendant perspectives on personal identity, which constitute the informational core of the form. However, rockumentary motivates knowledge in different ways to non-fiction works such as the long-form news documentary and its series of fact-based statements. In the rockumentary the provision of information (‘telling’) operates within and through a mode which emphasizes and exploits the representational capacities of the visual register (‘showing’). The form of knowledge produced within this mode is subjective, affective, visceral and sensuous and as such is a part of broader visual culture which ‘acknowledges appeals to the senses as a form of knowledge production. This form of knowledge production is distinct from appeals to the intellect or cognitive faculty. For the intellect, logic prevails over affect; for the senses the converse holds, bringing with it a distinct form of knowledge.’ In these terms ‘[t]he visual is no longer a means of verifying the certainty of facts pertaining to an objective, external world and truths about this world conveyed linguistically. The visual now constitutes the terrain of subjective experience...’

Rockumentary’s visual attraction is enhanced by its auditory features, though the soundtrack - while appealing in itself, especially to the fan/spectator attracted to rockumentary by the opportunity to hear particular music - is subservient to the image track, as the examples below of various rockumentaries demonstrate. This essay examines the scopic regime of rockumentary as it operates within and against the formal practices of direct cinema. The analysis attends to the development of the rockumentary form from its foundation in the 1960s in Don’t Look Back, to The Last Waltz of the late nineteen seventies, to demonstrations of punk music performance, including Jem Cohen’s Instrument (1999). Recent works in the rockumentary form - among them I Am Trying to Break Your Heart (2002), Dig! (2003), and Metallica: Some Kind of Monster (2004) - are also analysed with reference to rockumentary’s visual capacities. The range of work examined here traverses the formal and stylistic features of rockumentary as they derive from a core organisational principle – that which is referred to here as documentary display. Documentary display constitutes a revision of what film historian Tom Gunning has called the early ‘cinema of attractions’.

Rockumentary’s (direct) cinema of attractions is, as pointed out in the following section, centred on and conducted through the ‘attraction’ of onstage and off-stage performance.
Documentary Display and Performance

Gunning’s descriptions of so-called primitive cinema (circa pre-1907, before the dominance of narrative forms of cinema) as a cinema of attractions theorizes cinema as a series of visual shocks.11 The aesthetics of this cinema are exemplified through reference to the first film screened publicly for a sizeable audience, Lumière’s L’arrivée d’un train à la Ciotat/Arrival of a Train at a Station (1895). A foundational myth of cinema holds that at the sight of the approaching train on screen ‘spectators reared back in their seats, or screamed, or got up and ran from the auditorium (or all in succession)... Credibility overwhelms all else, the physical reflex signalling a visual trauma.’12 Whether or not screenings of Arrival of a Train produced such a demonstrable reaction (and serious doubts exist whether panic occurred during the film’s screenings in the Salon Indien of the Grand Café in Paris), ‘there is no question that reactions of astonishment and even a type of terror accompanied many early projections.’13 In a similar way Edison’s short film Electrocuting an Elephant (1903) illustrates features of the exhibitionistic aesthetic of attractions. An elephant is secured to a large electrified plate, which is switched on. Smoke rises from the elephant’s feet and shortly thereafter the hapless animal falls on its side. ‘The moment of technologically advanced death is neither further explained nor dramatised’, notes Gunning.14 As with Arrival of a Train, viewer curiosity is aroused and fulfilled in ‘a brief moment of revelation typical of the cinema of attractions. This is a cinema of instants, rather than developing situations.’15 Such a cinema eschews narrative action or empathy with characters; it is, instead, one which emphasizes ‘the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfilment... This cinema addresses and holds the spectator, emphasizing the act of display. In fulfilling this curiosity, it delivers a generally brief dose of scopic pleasure.’16

The ‘act of display’, and its associated pleasure, evident in the early cinema of attractions corresponds in various ways to what is here called documentary display, a practice which intensifies the visual capacities of the nonfictional work to the point of spectacle, understood to be the maximization of the scopic regime and its associated pleasures. In this relation Rutsky and Wyatt have noted the uneasy status notions of pleasure occupy in academic discourse on cinema. Within this discourse, concepts of pleasure and distraction are commonly associated with ‘mere entertainment’ and aligned with the realm of fictional film. Film history does admit the place of pleasure, as Gunning’s analysis of the cinema of attractions demonstrates, though ‘[i]n all, the more “difficult”, more “enlightening” pleasures of non-narrative form and formal experimentation are affirmed over [the] reassuring, conventional pleasures...frequently associated with
commercial or mass culture.' In this way, 'legitimate, serious pleasures' evoked in reference to non-fiction film 'must be “domesticated”'; they must remain subordinated to, in the service of, an external standard of judgement, a truth that, whether idealist or materialist, is always rational. ¹⁷ Within the so-called serious pleasure of the documentary the emphasis falls on 'serious', whereas pleasure and associated conceptions of fun are ‘domesticated’ (weakened or subverted) to the point that documentary is characterized as a discourse of sobriety which, generally, is 'not a lot of laughs.' ¹⁸

Rockumentary disrupts such assessments. The pleasures and shocks of rockumentary are evident, for example, in a description of spectator reactions to a screening of a first editorial cut of Woodstock (1970): 'As soon as [the audience was] seated...we began to roll [film]. And rock and roll we did! The screening would last four hours without intermission. The atmosphere in [the screening room] was so vibrant, so electric [that it] could never be...duplicated... Superlatives are inadequate to describe the synergy that bound everyone together for those four hours. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience... After each [on screen] act, [audience members] applauded and shouted.'¹⁹ Such an audience response - a physical expression of the affective power of rockumentary - operates in a way which does not strictly conform to common interpretations of pleasurable viewing. Rutsky and Wyatt argue that the presence of truth claims restricts pleasure and sensorial impact. In the rockumentary, performance - which functions in dialectical relationship with truth claims - is the productive realm of spectator pleasure.

Typically, an assumption within established exegesis of the documentary of the form’s unmediated and unreconstructed access to the real has not admitted a place for notions of performance before or in reaction to the documentary camera. Rockumentary, with its relentless foregrounding of the performing body and the performance of music, revises this understanding. As with American avant-garde films of the 1960s, rockumentaries of the decade and those produced since that time create a cinema in which the ‘performing body [is] the central focus of the gaze.'²⁰ The performing body in the rockumentary is not, however, limited to onstage presentation and histrionics. A master trope of the rockumentary is the distinction between onstage performances and so-called 'backstage', an area which supposedly offers unmediated glimpses of the 'real' person behind the performance. The 'backstage' convention frequently exploits the hand-held camera of direct cinema and its capacity to film in confined and poorly lit spaces such as dressing rooms, concert hall corridors, the back seats of limousines, and hotel rooms. Erving Goffman, in his sociological and psychological study of selfhood, The Presentation of Self in Everyday
*Life*, examines various behaviours undertaken in particular social environments, among them 'backstage', the physical space behind or off stage in which a performer can relax and 'step out of character'. Such an understanding informs the convention of backstage as it operates in the rockumentary where, as Jonathan Romney argues, it is 'the most potent of all concepts designed to separate performer and fan. It is a space of privacy, a world behind the curtain in which the real being, the ineffable precious essence of the performer’s self, supposedly lies shielded from sight...'. In Romney's account the convention creates a distinction between the public space of the stage, where a performer presents a persona constructed for the purposes of entertaining an audience, and the private spaces off stage in which the mask of the performer is dropped and the person behind the performer is revealed. However, recent critical work on performance in popular factual entertainment complicates simple distinctions between the public and private space, performance and non-performance.

Commentators on the 'reality' televisual phenomenon have noted the difficulty in distinguishing on-camera authenticity and performance, and indeed much of the appeal for the spectator of popular factual entertainment is generated by an awareness of the on-camera subject's perpetual performance. In classic observationalism the subject does not appear to be performing; indeed there is an attempt by both subject and director to treat speech and behaviour as 'naturally' as possible. In popular factual entertainment, in contrast, observation becomes the impetus for the non-professional to perform. The point is exemplified in docusoaps, which are populated by people willing, or seeking, to appear before the camera and who, in their modes of personal presentation, often adopt performative styles and attitudes. However, this fact does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of depictions of 'real' or authentic behaviour. This understanding is implicated with the nature of self-revelation in performance. 'At times in life we meet people who we feel are acting. This does not mean that they are lying, dishonest, living in an unreal world, or necessarily giving a false impression of their character or personality. It means that they seem to be aware of an audience - to be 'on stage' - and that they relate to the situation by energetically projecting ideas, emotions, and elements of their personality, underlining and theatricalizing it for the sake of the audience. They are acting their own emotions and beliefs.'

This quality impacts in a specific way on viewers' experience of the docusap, notably in the fact that viewers derive gratification from such programs by locating the 'authentic' self within the performance. The 'game' of 'performing the real' and locating the real within the performance is complicated within the gamedoc format of *Big Brother*. The viewer's search for moments of authenticity is increased in a program that uses a
non-natural setting (a house that is a studio) which reinforces self-conscious and self-aware performance, not naturalism, as the prime focus of the program. Annette Hill’s analysis of Big Brother offers a useful way to understand the process of identifying the ‘authentic’ person within the performative role by replacing the notion of performance with the practice of ‘self-display’. Hill notes that ‘[f]or the average TV viewer, judging authenticity in popular factual programs such as BB [Big Brother] is related to judging the integrity of the self. When contestants in BB are faced with emotionally difficult situations, they often reveal their ‘true’ nature. Audience attraction to judging levels of authenticity in BB is primarily based on whether contestants stay true to themselves, rather than whether the program is truthful in its depiction of contestants.’27 As Hill emphasizes, Big Brother and other variants of popular factual entertainment rework the search for evidence of the real within a focus on the presentation of the self.

Significantly, Hill’s conception of the operation and function of self-display reinforces the practice of visual attraction in the rockumentary. As with popular factual entertainment, representational claims to the real or truth are attenuated, though still present, in the rockumentary. Disrupting Romney’s account of the function of public and private space, the revelation of truth in the rockumentary is not a simple function of a dialectical relationship between onstage and backstage spaces. Rather, conceptions of truth in the rockumentary are located within and emerge from the revelation of an authentic self within (onstage and backstage) performances, which are the core of rockumentary’s documentary display. The process of performance - and the exposure or display of the performative self, the self as performer - is the structural basis of Pennebaker’s groundbreaking work, Dont Look Back.

Dont Look Back: Performing the Documentary28

Dont Look Back, a record of Bob Dylan’s triumphant 1965 concert tour of the UK, includes a number of Dylan’s onstage performances amidst scenes of life away from the spotlight.29 The intriguing aspect of Dont Look Back is the degree of attention the film gives to depicting the exploits of Dylan and his entourage in ‘off stage’ environments such as hotel rooms. Such scenes constitute another level of performance in which Dylan continues, in effect, to perform for the camera away from the stage.30 The film’s prologue, which was suggested to Pennebaker by Dylan, exemplifies Pennebaker’s willingness to abandon pure direct cinema by foregrounding off-stage performance as one of the film’s central concerns - not as something to be minimized or banished, but as an activity to be encouraged and highlighted. The segment features Dylan, standing in an alleyway in London flipping through large cue cards inscribed with hand-lettered words of his song
‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’, which plays on the soundtrack. During the sequence Dylan stands facing the camera working through the cards, the first inscribed with ‘BASEMENT’ (in the song Dylan sings ‘Johnny’s in the basement mixing up the medicine…’), continuing with others which bear various lyrics from the song: ‘LOOK OUT!’ , ‘WATCH IT!’ , ‘HERE THEY COME!’ , ‘LEADERS???’ , and so on. Dylan discards the cards one by one as the song continues to play. Dylan’s act is replete with knowing looks to the camera which also depicts the alleyway in the background, empty except for the brief appearance of a bearded figure carrying a staff (the poet Allen Ginsburg). At the end of the segment, as the song is fading on the soundtrack, another man (Dylan’s friend Bob Neuwirth) enters the frame, nods at Dylan, and the two walk away in opposite directions, with Dylan heading down the alley without looking back.

The prologue is a fully contained segment within the broader film, and it approximates what later became the ‘rock clip’, short interpretative works produced to accompany rock songs on television in formats such as those on MTV. The segment positions Dylan ‘centre stage’ within a self-conscious performance. In these terms the prologue can either be considered out of place, even inappropriate, within the context of observationalism, or, alternatively, an indication that performative abandonment of the pretence of naturalism will supersede the demands of a direct cinema committed to naturalism and observation. It is clear that as the film progresses, and as Dylan continues to act for the camera, Dylan’s proposal to include the segment, and Pennebaker’s agreement to do so, signals an emphasis on the performative which extends beyond the realms of the stage. William Rothman, in his lengthy and dense analysis of Don't Look Back, suggests that the purpose of the prologue is to announce that the film is not merely a ‘documentary’; it is, instead, a ‘collaboration in which filmmaker and subject are co-conspirators.’ In this way the prologue functions as a marker that the body of the film will also be a ‘performance by co-conspirators’. This is not to suggest that Pennebaker consciously set out to ‘defraud’ or deceive the viewer. The ‘collusion’ between Dylan and Pennebaker does, however, point to a manipulation, or transgression of the codes of direct cinema. The prologue, as with the rest of the film, constitutes Pennebaker’s willingness to abandon ‘pure’ direct cinema, and to give reign, with Dylan’s participation, to performance - both on and off stage.

Another indication of this willingness occurs during an interview between Dylan and a Jamaican correspondent for the BBC, one of the many interviews in the film. The interviewer asks, ‘How did it all begin for you, Bob?’ . Dylan mumbles inaudibly and the film cuts to footage of a young Dylan singing ‘He’s Only a Pawn in Their Game’ at a civil rights rally in Mississippi. As the scattered crowd at the rally applauds his performance,
another cut introduces Dylan onstage during the 1965 tour singing ‘The Times They Are A-Changin’’. The cuts from contemporary action to the past depicted in archival footage, back to contemporary action, disrupts the temporal and spatial continuity that narratively orders observationalism, replacing it with the non-narrativized presence of performance. Elsewhere, Dylan’s musical performances are structured into the narrative as he heads north to Manchester and back to London though, ironically, the narrative lacks the ‘honesty’ and ‘integrity’ of the Mississippi performance, a function of Dylan’s constant performing off stage. Within these performances there is no way to get ‘access’ to ‘the real’ Dylan.

Such access is, as noted above, suggested within the convention of onstage/backstage. While *Dont Look Back* replicates the two domains of onstage and backstage, the film doesn’t fully reproduce what are in other rock documentaries the attendant meanings of public and private space. We are permitted backstage, but not granted access to the ‘real being’. Off stage Dylan continues to perform, particularly in the presence of the many interviewers who appear in the backstage spaces. At certain times, Dylan seems to take delight in the interviews, and at other times he appears to be annoyed by interviewers, but both reactions are evidently calculated. Dylan appears as a masterful role player, an obfuscationist, indulging in word games and gambits, willing to spin stories which are clearly fabricated at the interviewer’s expense. In one particular interview, with Horace Judson, the London-based arts correspondent for *Time* magazine, Dylan launches a verbal attack on Judson and steps out of the role of interviewee by asking Judson unanswerable questions. The scene is unsettling - Dylan, the man of peace indulging in verbal aggression - and it is difficult not to wonder whether it was another example of Dylan’s performance. Indeed, Judson felt that the scene was contrived as an entertaining sequence for the film to compensate for the fact that the recorded interview had gone flat.

In other, less overtly dramatic moments, the film captures, if not Dylan acting for the camera, then his awareness of the camera’s presence which is revealed, however fleetingly, in his glances at the camera. Having thrown a hotel assistant out of the room, telling him to go to his ‘fop manager’, Dylan looks to-camera. On another occasion, while playing music and talking with Alan Price of the Animals, Dylan starts a song and then looks directly at the camera, annoyed, it seems, that Pennebaker is at that moment still filming when, for once, Dylan would prefer he wasn’t. In these moments, and particularly during his interactions with interviewers, the camera reveals or inspires performances which are, in effect, an acknowledgment of the camera’s presence. The camera doesn’t capture the man ‘behind the shades’. As Pennebaker pointed out, Dylan ‘knew that the camera was recording [him] in a way which [he] elected to be recorded. [He was]
enacting [a] role...very accurately.” By privileging and, in effect, licensing Dylan’s off-stage ‘performances’ for the camera _Dont Look Back_ complicates the direct cinema rhetoric of detached observationalism and the claim that the presence of a camera doesn’t modify a subject’s behaviour. More particularly, _Dont Look Back_ effectively documents a consummate performer, and extends the opportunities (in the prologue and throughout the film) for Dylan to perform. Pennebaker is implicated in this process not as neutral observer but as co-conspirator colluding in Dylan’s performances.

_The Last Waltz: Image and Sound_

The relationship of performance, observationalism, and levels of directorial intervention raised by _Dont Look Back_ is a critical component of Scorsese’s _The Last Waltz_. The film mixes interviews with members of The Band with a visual chronicle of the final concert given by the band in San Francisco on Thanksgiving Day, 1976. If, as Stephen Sevein has argued, the film ‘represents a dramatic reimagining of the possibilities inherent in the “rockumentary” genre’ it does so by ‘reimagining’ (in the form of a revision) many of the formal aspects of rockumentary. Sevein’s comment that ‘Scorsese’s camerawork...confounds the expectations of the genre by essentially eliminating the audience from the film’ notes the way in which _The Last Waltz_ revises one of the conventions of films such as _Woodstock_ and _Gimme Shelter_. In these films shots of the audience, and in the case of _Woodstock_, extended interview sequences with members of the audience, add another dimension to the rockumentary master tropes of backstage and onstage. Indeed _Woodstock_ (following _Monterey Pop_ ) informs the stylistic language of onstage through widespread use of a shot from the back of the stage in which performers are framed against the audience in a way which depicts the size of the crowd and which establishes performers in symbiotic relationship with the audience. In contrast, _The Last Waltz_, as with _Dont Look Back_, rarely depicts the audience before the onstage performer. _The Last Waltz_’s revision of established formal codes of the rockumentary is further evident in the film’s abandonment of the direct cinema pretensions to observational purity which informed _Dont Look Back_ and _Gimme Shelter_. Whereas Pennebaker in _Dont Look Back_ uses the questioning of Dylan by journalists as the basis of a form of exposition, and a similar effect is achieved in _Gimme Shelter_ within Jagger’s commentary on events at Altamont as he watches a replay of scenes on the Maysles editing machine, _The Last Waltz_ openly employs the expository technique of interviewing the film’s subjects.

Any sense of a so-called pure observationalism is further erased in the elaborate directorial planning of the concert footage segments. Scorsese prepared a two hundred page script of the shoot which incorporated specific
details of the performance, to the level of ‘scripting every [guitar] solo, every tambourine shake.’\textsuperscript{41} The approach not only abandons the direct cinema ethic of non-intervention in the profilmic scene, it also, in effect, denies ‘backstage’ shots of rehearsals.\textsuperscript{42} In The Last Waltz, the rehearsal is replaced by a closely scripted on-camera performance. Such revisions of the premises of observationalism do not, however, necessarily distinguish The Last Waltz from its direct cinema antecedents. As with Dont Look Back, The Last Waltz privileges the image track above the sound track thereby foregrounding visuality - documentary display as visual spectacle - as the basis of the film’s formal composition.\textsuperscript{43} The elaborate shooting script emphasizes the visual appeal of the performance - every guitar solo, every tambourine shake.

The relationship of image and sound in the rockumentary was inverted within the representational format of music television and its paradigmatic expression, the cable television station MTV, which commenced broadcasts in August 1981 soon after The Last Waltz was produced. A number of analyses of MTV have pointed to the commercial basis of the form, and emphasized the role of music video as a promotional tool for performers.\textsuperscript{44} On these grounds MTV is not necessarily distinguishable from the numerous rockumentaries which have been conceived or produced within the commercial framework of the popular music industry as promotional vehicles for the industry’s ‘products’. However, a notable difference between the dominant formal logic of the rockumentary and broadcast music video is that the ruling formal characteristic of the ‘MTV aesthetic’ is one in which editing is submitted ‘to the customary tempi of popular music.’\textsuperscript{45} As David James notes, ‘in almost all broadcast music video, the image track is controlled by the sound track; the visuals are assimilated to the song’s rhythms.’\textsuperscript{46} Despite MTV’s intervention within the visual and auditory representation of rock or popular music, the styles of music video on television did not set a standard for rockumentary’s visual and sonic form. More relevant to the development of rockumentary than MTV was punk rock, which emerged at roughly the same time as MTV, and which provided new aesthetic forms for the representation of music performance.

\textbf{Beyond Observation}

Punk music offered an alternative to the stands of utopianism, hedonism, and consumption sustained by prevailing musical genres. The production of punk - a musical form which is ‘militantly amateur, anti-music, deliberately rudimentary and abrasive\textsuperscript{47} - mobilized a ‘do-it-yourself’ mode of production that challenged the corporate production strategies of the mass-market music industry. The inevitable incorporation of punk by the music industry revised the ‘DIY’ aspect of the music, though punk’s radical sonic
alterity remained relatively intact and provided a basis for punk’s musical successors, thrash and hardcore. Punk music videos - documentations of punk music performance - partake of punk music’s formal characteristics and production values and thereby function in opposition to commercial television’s broadcast practices and standards. As David James notes, ‘though the category of “alternative” videos, playable only in specifically demarcated time-slots functions [within television schedules] as a holding-zone where the always shifting boundaries between assimilable and nonassimilable practices can be continually negotiated, certain videos are categorically inadmissible, even to the “alternative” reservation’. Punk music videos, ‘where the rudimentary quality of the music and the low production values of its televisualizaton combine with unacceptable social practices, are a case in point.’

The connections between punk music and the formal and productive practices of punk music video (or DVD) are illustrated in the example of Jem Cohen’s Instrument (1999), a documentation of the Washington, D.C. hardcore punk band Fugazi. Cohen’s work reproduces the low production values of punk cinema and punk music video and utilizes a mixture of film formats, including 8mm, super 8mm, 16mm, and video. Such an incorporation of differing film gauges and stocks, and a collagist weaving of scenes shot in each format, was a response to financial restraints imposed on the filmmaking practice over much of the ten years taken to compile the footage and a mode of production that included filmed segments of Fugazi performances donated by non-professional filmmakers. In this way the independent production practices and DIY, collagist method of Instrument not only visually realizes Fugazi’s music, it sustains ‘practices with the same social and aesthetic impulses as the music.’

In the spirit of Fugazi’s anti-commercial position, Instrument was not devised as a promotional vehicle for the band. Cohen had been shooting footage of the band for a number of years before Fugazi began to financially support what at the time was conceived as a documentary ‘project’, not a film. The filmmaking process was undertaken as collaboration between Cohen and members of the band and extended to editorial decisions and a soundtrack which, in contradiction of most music documentations, was produced specifically for the film. Cohen’s commitment to the ‘project’ that became Instrument derives from a basic documentary impulse, which Cohen referred to when he stated that his motivation for making films is ‘to try to honestly capture something that goes on around me…’ However, Cohen was not concerned to replicate other documentaries about music and to this end he understood that in order to ‘create a filmic form that…stepped over [visual] boundaries’ he would not watch or study any rockumentaries. Cohen wanted to ‘capture music-making and [to] try to make something that
felt, visually, like music, and something where the music was inextricably tied in with the moving pictures.  

*Instrument* is composed of numerous segments comprising live performances, interviews with band members conducted over the years, and everyday scenes shot in motels, recording studios, and on the road, during the band’s tours of the US and Europe. The segments are separated by text from the lyrics of Fugazi songs, thereby visually representing one component of Fugazi’s music. More particularly, the attempt to visually represent Fugazi’s performances and the band’s experiences results in visually arresting images which, combined, produce a trance or dreamlike quality. The effect is increased within the method of filming the band in concert which, like the live show itself, uses minimal white lighting, abjuring gimmicky staging. The near darkness of the stage depicts band members, in Cohen’s words, ‘like they’re coal miners going to work.’ The dreamlike or hallucinatory effect is also partially the function of the film’s compositional organization and its constant and captivating movement between scenes of boisterous and uninhibited onstage performances and scenes which depict, in a manner verging on the surreal and the luminescent, lived experience on the road.

This approach, which functions as the basis of the film’s visual appeal, stems from a revision of the documentary project in which everyday experience is represented in a realist mode as a rational world. *Instrument* depicts a reality out-of-kilter with common expectations and understandings. For Cohen, ‘[t]he world is insane. The world that we drive around in, [or see while touring] with the band...is insane, and so the project should reflect that. It shouldn’t just be about rock and roll, or indie rock, or four guys and what they’re like...It should be about other things which are central to lived experience.’ Cohen stresses that ‘[o]ne of the reasons why I work with Fugazi and they work with me is that we enjoy travelling through this madness. It’s what they write songs about and it’s what I try to document in my films.’ The aim of this approach is, on the one hand, ‘a simple evocation of what it’s like to be a musician and on the other hand it’s a not-so-simple evocation of what it’s like to be a musician in this very strange world [italics in original].’ Cohen’s representations of Fugazi onstage, combined with an approach to a reality understood to be hallucinatory and ‘insane’, produces a film which exceeds the realist boundaries of documentary and becomes, like punk itself, a performance of an ‘alternate’ or oppositional array of experiences. In this way the performative display of *Instrument* constitutes the complete abandonment of the premises of direct cinema, thereby pushing the rockumentary beyond its traditional grounding in observational forms.
The Crisis Moment: Blind Faith and the Act of Seeing

The passing of punk, and the evisceration of its visual and sonic energies by the commercial practices of the popular film and music industries, was followed by the emergence of new popular musical genres and a resurgence of established musical styles, and an increasing reliance on interviews in rockumentaries. Numerous rockumentaries, among them Year of the Horse and the recent films Dig!, I Am Trying to Break Your Heart, and Metallica: Some Kind of Monster, include talking heads as a feature of the work. The emphasis in contemporary films on exposition in the form of interviews, and a move away from the representation of onstage performance, is, as with punk documentations, evidence of an abandonment of the observationalism that motivated the rise of the rockumentary. However, recent works do not as thoroughly abrogate the legacies of direct cinema as punk music film and video. In fact many recent rockumentaries renovate and recycle one of direct cinema’s foundational principles, the so-called crisis moment.

The crisis structure follows the logic that a person involved in a crisis is unlikely to be aware of the presence of the camera. The result, allegedly, would be the revelation of the subject’s true nature captured on film. This logic was translated into a number of direct cinema films which chose as their subject matter situations liable to result in crises. Recent rockumentaries deploy crisis as a technique with the potential to provide unguarded insights into the actions of band members, though more particularly contemporary works recast crisis as a performative attraction. In this way, crises within a band’s career - typically in the form of rivalry between band members (as in Metallica: Some Kind of Monster, and End of the Century: The Story of the Ramones, 2004), or between one band and another, competing band (as in Dig!) - are structured not merely as a crucial ‘moment’ in a narrative, but inform extended sequences as the core of the film and the basis of its appeal. Metallica: Some Kind of Monster, a chronicle of the strains facing members of the phenomenally successful heavy metal band Metallica, is perhaps the most popular of the recent spate of rockumentaries to employ the crisis structure. During the recording of their latest album the band members employ a so-called performance enhancement coach to negotiate the personal rivalries which threaten to destroy the band. The film follows the revelations of deep divisions between members which are exacerbated by the departure from the band of guitarist James Hetfield. After months in an alcohol rehabilitation clinic, during which time he had no contact with the band, Hetfield returns to the band and the recording studio with a list of personal demands and strict limitations on the time he is willing to devote to the production of the album. The situation rekindles and deepens tensions within the band, especially between Hetfield and drummer Lars Ulrich.
The film was co-produced by Joel Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, two directors trained in the techniques of direct cinema. Berlinger worked with the Maysles brothers and it was at the Maysles' production company, Maysles Films, that he met Sinofsky. The legacy of their direct cinema training is evident in their recasting of direct cinema's 'fly on the wall' approach. A variant of the technique is applied in Metallica: Some Kind of Monster, and is described by the filmmakers, referring to their constant filming presence, in terms of 'always buzzing around, like a fly' in the ears of all four members of the band. Further traces of direct cinema's operational approach are evident in other comments made by the filmmakers. According to Berlinger and Sinofsky the 'presence of cameras tended to stimulate rather than stifle candour', an assumption reinforced by Ulrich who commented that '[t]he camera can be a truth instigator.'

According to Sinofsky, observational, ever-present filming - and a commitment to accept the process without censorship - requires 'blind faith' on behalf of both subjects and the filmmakers. The result of such blind faith is an open willingness to examine the band's crisis, the 'truthful' visual and emotional core of the film. The crisis climaxes in six minutes of screen time focused on an argument between Hetfield and Ulrich. Sinofsky notes that the 'purging went on for three hours. That was [Ulrich] projectile-vomiting 20 years of anger, anxiety and all the things he felt were wrong with [Hetfield], himself and the group. It was amazing. We were exhausted [by watching]. And we cut it down to just six minutes.' The result is a remarkable performance - by the filmmakers and by the 'social actors', the subjects, within the scene. In this way, the truth which emerges from the film (a 'demystification of the mythology of rock stars', according to one commentator) interacts with and is grounded in a visual performance which is the basis of viewer captivation and attraction.

In Metallica: Some Kind of Monster, as with the other works examined here, performance - onstage in musical performances and off stage within enactments of the self - is the basis of a documentary display as it is constructed variously within, through and against either a recycling or a revision of the formal features of direct cinema. In this way documentary display, as the central formal principle of the works examined here, interacts with the category of the performative resulting in works which are visually alluring and pleasurable and which, as a result, constitute rockumentary as an immensely popular form of documentary practice which continues to exert a strong audience appeal. Brian Winston has claimed that '[d]irect cinema made the rock performance/tour movie into the most popular and commercially viable documentary form thus far.' The inverse of this assessment may be closer to the mark: the rockumentary turned direct
cinema into a commercially and widely available form, one which the rockumentary has at times returned to and superseded in its scopic attention to performative display.

ENDNOTES

1 Although Scorsese has become best known for his fictional films, he began his filmmaking career working on nonfictional rock films. He was an assistant director and principal editor on Woodstock (1970), and in 1971 he was associate producer of Medicine Ball Caravan, a film of a US tour undertaken by assorted rock bands, among them The Youngbloods. In 1972 he was an advisor to the production Elvis on Tour.

2 K. Thompson and D. Bordwell, Film History: An Introduction, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1994, p. 668; B. Winston, Lies, Damned Lies and Documentaries, BFI Publishing, London, 2000, p. 52. 'Rockumentary' as it is conceived here refers to nonfictional works based on a concert performance by a rock performer or rock band(s), or those which mix concert performances with scenes of the musician(s) offstage. This loose description is intended to distinguish 'rockumentary' from numerous closely aligned works, especially those which have been spawned by the rise of DVD as the major home format for visual entertainment. As one reviewer of music DVDs notes, 'DVD always runs the risk of turning into a dustbin for live shows...’ (A. Sweeting, 'Break for the Border', Uncut, no. 85, June 2004, p. 134.). Rockumentary is distinguishable from outakes of performances (frequently culled from 'live' television shows, so-called television music specials). Further, the description of rockumentary employed here sets the form apart from promotional videos such as those produced for MTV, analyses of the music industry or musicology, and histories of musical genres such as rock or the blues. So-called rock music is not the exclusive musical form enacted in 'rockumentary', though for the sake of convenience the popular form of music referred to as rock is appropriated to serve as the label for various popular contemporary musics represented in observational documentary forms.


5 As Steve Neale points out, Oklahoma! (1955) and Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (1954) can also be considered as musicals and westerns (S. Neale, 'Questions of Genre' in R. Stam and T. Miller [eds.], Film and Theory: An Anthology, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, p. 166). However, these films more rigorously integrate components of the musical genre than Paint Your Wagon, with its ill-conceived inclusion of Lee Marvin singing, among other blunders.


7 Elizabeth Cowie outlines distinctions between 'showing' and 'telling' in documentary in 'The Spectacle of Actuality' in J. Gaines and M. Renov (eds.), Collecting Visible Evidence, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999.

8 Barsam pointed to arguments concerning direct cinema's failure to contextualize historical conditions when he noted that 'some viewers [of direct cinema] recognized it as art while they still seemed to yearn for the Griersonian interpretative viewpoint against which direct cinema developed.' R. Barsam, Nonfiction Film: A Critical History, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992, p. 333.


14 Ibid., p. 122.

15 Ibid., p. 123.

16 Ibid., p. 121.


24 In *Cops* (1989), and other variants of crime-based reality television in the US, producers were known to advise the police on performance techniques, and were willing to direct police in the delivery of dialogue and how to ‘act’ for the camera. R. Andersen, *Consumer Culture and TV Programming*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1995, p. 181.


Waugh, ""Acting to Play Oneself": Notes on Performance in Documentary', in C. Zucker (ed.), Making Visible the Invisible: An Anthology of Original Essays on Film Acting, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, New Jersey, 1990, p. 29; ‘Containing Fire: Performance in Paris is Burning' in B. Grant and J. Stomisowski (eds.), Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1998, p. 129. Performance is here used to refer to acts of self-display, whether on or off stage, and, as in the case of Don't Look Back, for example, subtle reflections on the representation of such practices. Susan Scheibler summarizes the latter point when she notes that in certain cases ‘The question of performance, captured by the video camera, involves an element of self-reflexivity, but a reflexivity that lies beyond a disclosure of its own mechanism.' S. Scheibler, 'Constantly Performing the Documentary: The Seductive Promise of Lightning Over Water' in M. Reno (ed.), Theorizing Documentary, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 136; The ‘zero-degree style' of direct cinema ensures that, as in Don't Look Back, the self-reflexivity is muted. The section here on Don't Look Back highlights Pennebaker's 'reflections' on the process of self-revelation and performance. The subheading to the section is indebted to Scheibler's analysis.


29 David Hadju has suggested that Don't Look Back was itself a reconstruction - a performance - of the Beatles film A Hard Day's Night (Richard Lester, 1964), itself a 'fanciful simulation' of direct cinema. According to Hadju, 'Director Richard Lester's fictional peek behind the scenes on a Beatles tour had been released the previous July, and it had influenced the behaviour of...Bob Dylan...[whose tour of Britain] was like a reel added to the Beatles film.' It is an interesting suggestion though Hadju offers little evidence to support the claim. (D. Hadju, Positively 4th Street, Bloomsbury, London, 2001, p. 250.) While Hadju claims a legacy for Don't Look Back in a Beatles film, Neaverson argues that the Beatles documentary Let it Be (1970), directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, was 'partly inspired' by Don't Look Back. (B. Neaverson, The Beatles Movies, Cassell, London, 1997, p. 103). If the latter is the case, it is unlikely that Lindsay-Hogg and the Beatles, always seeking to be innovative, would have chosen to make a film based on a 'copy' of one of their own films.

30 Dylan's parody of his own stage persona is continued in his recent fictional film Masked and Anonymous (2003), in which he plays an ageing rock star, Jack Fate. The title of the film is a reference to the impossibility of knowing the Fate character and, by extension, to the elusiveness of the Dylan persona.

31 Indeed, Dylan's manager, Albert Grossman, had conceived of Pennebaker's film as an opportunity to produce promotional clips for Dylan's songs.


33 Don't Look Back includes a shot which clearly indicates a separation of stage and backstage - a shaky tracking shot following Dylan and his companions as they flee the stage area of a concert hall by running along corridors, up and down staircases, past fans in the street, and into a waiting limousine which will take them to a secluded hotel room. The shot, which mirrors a famous shot made by Albert Maysles for Primary in which John Kennedy is followed into an auditorium of waiting well-wishers, has since become a rockumentary cliche parodied in This is Spinal Tap (1984), in a scene in which the fictional band gets lost in a similar set of corridors and stairs as those along which Dylan fled the stage.


38 In this way *Don’t Look Back* points to the essential paradox that underlines the direct cinema claim: the notion of a subject ‘acting naturally’ in the presence of the camera.


40 It is arguable, however, whether such a development in Scorsese’s hands productively expands the generic formal boundaries of the rockumentary. As Severn notes, Scorsese ‘truly is a terrible interviewer - nervous and tentative’ ibid, p. 28. In this case a voice-over commentary, as opposed to interviews, may have provided a clearer exposition. Scorsese’s own commentary for his contribution to the BFI Century of Cinema series, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies*, (1995) and for his four-hour documentary, *My Voyage to Italy* (1999) are, in contrast to his interview technique in *The Last Waltz*, erudite and engaging. In *The Last Waltz*, in contrast to other rockumentaries featuring interviews, it is the interviewer, not the interviewee(s), who suffers from a certain inarticulateness. Comments by members of Crazy Horse, Neil Young’s band for the concerts depicted in Jim Jarmusch’s *Year of the Horse*, illustrate a general vacuousness and banality associated with interviews in the rockumentary. In a list of ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’ of the rockumentary Adrian Wootton advises against the inclusion of interviews with band members. A. Wootton, ‘The Do’s and Don’ts of Rock Documentaries’ in J. Romney and A. Wootton (eds.), *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music since the 50s*, BFI Publishing, London, 1995. Direct cinema frequently replaces exposition in the form of interviews with the observation of conversations as the purveyor of information.

41 R. Hernandez, ‘Phases and Stages’, *The Austin Chronicle*, June 2002, p. 10. In an audio commentary to the DVD version of *The Last Waltz* Scorsese talks of his attraction to Michael Powell’s notion of the ‘composed film’ in which ‘movement, color, [and] texture’ are all carefully choreographed by the director. Following this dictum *The Last Waltz* relies on a production designer (Boris Leven) and mixes concert footage shot and staged according to Scorsese’s script with studio performances shot for the film on the MGM soundstage in Culver City.

42 ‘Backstage’ rehearsals are also a central component of non-direct cinema approaches. Godard’s *One Plus One* (1968) uses scenes of the Rolling Stones rehearsing their song ‘Sympathy for the Devil’ as the film’s central structuring device.

43 The emphasis on the visual over the sonic in *Don’t Look Back* results in the fact that the film rarely includes a complete version of a song. The integrity of Dylan’s songs are subsumed within, and ruled by, the visual domain.

44 As in, for example, S. Levy, ‘Ad Nauseam: How MTV Sells Out Rock and Roll’, *Rolling Stone*, December 8, 1983, pp. 30-34, 37, 74, 76.


Like punk music, punk cinema's art brut character was informed by a 'low-tech' approach to film production. Such an approach to filmmaking was rigorously expressed in the so-called cinema of transgression produced in New York during the 1980s and early 1990s. Filmmakers in this category - among them Richard Kern, Beth B, Nick Zedd and Vivienne Dick - exploited the availability of cheap cameras, notably synchronised sound super 8mm cameras, and later video technology, to produce fiction and nonfiction works which explored themes of drug taking, urban poverty, nihilism, and sexual experimentation. The formal characteristics of punk cinema are discussed in J. Buchsbaum, 'A La Recherche des Punks Perdus', Film Comment, May 1981, pp. 43-6, and S. Thompson, 'Punk Cinema', Cinema Journal, vol. 43, no. 2, winter 2004, pp. 47-66, which is reproduced in N. Romes (ed.), New Punk Cinema, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005.


D. James, 'Avant-Garde Film and Music Video: A View from Zürich', in his Power Misses: Essays Across (Un)Popular Culture, Verso, London, 1996, p. 242. Fugazi's commitment to a truly independent form of music production extended to distancing itself from the major channels supporting commercial popular music. Band members declined to undertake interviews with the mainstream press and most music magazines, and the band's music was rarely played on commercial radio or MTV. Despite the absence of media exposure, Fugazi sold over 200,000 copies of its albums Red Medicine, Steady Diet of Nothing, and Repeater through its own music label.


Ibid, p. 20.

Ibid.


Ibid.

The dramatic potential created by impending or unravelling crisis was exploited within the so-called crisis structure or crisis moment of various works produced by a team of filmmakers working with Robert Drew for the ABC television network in the 1960s. The technique was pursued in Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment (1963) and The Chair (1962). Primary (1960) defers to the technique by choosing to follow presidential candidates involved in a hectic round of electioneering. The crisis structure, and its assumption of an observational stance capable of revealing 'true' behaviours, continued in different ways to inform various direct cinema works of the late 1960s such as Salesman, by the Maysles brothers (1969), and the television series An American Family, Craig Gilbert, 1973.

62 E. Gundersen, ‘Candid Metallica Creates Angst-Filled “Monster”’, USA Today, 1, August 2004, p. 36.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Bill Nichols uses the term social actors to refer to the subjects of documentary in Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary, Indiana University Press, 1991, and in his subsequent writings.
66 Gundersen, ‘Candid Metallica’.