The Segmenting Spectator: Documentary Structure and *The Aristocrats*

GREG M. SMITH

Abstract: This article argues that an emphasis on how spectators piece together documentary structure is more useful than nonfiction film theory's focus on epistemology and categorization. By examining individual texts such as *The Aristocrats*, critics can develop a set of devices that provide a better explanation of documentary comprehension at the local level. As an example, this article shows how a spectatorial position as an insider in the comedy world and the device of the "conversational turn" help us both segment the documentary flow and unify it.

Keywords: *The Aristocrats*, comedy, documentary theory, genre, narration, segmentation, structure

As a scholar primarily interested in narrative in fiction film and television, I approached *The Aristocrats* as a film having to deal with an exceptionally difficult narrative challenge: how do you maintain an audience's interest in a one-joke film? When Paul Provenza and Penn Jillette had completed their interviews with various comedians, the filmmakers were faced with the daunting challenge of structuring their footage in a way that doesn't tire the audience with repetitions of the same gag. In this article I arrive at some limited explanations that are specific to the construction of *The Aristocrats*, but I use this particular case study to argue a more general assertion: that nonfiction film theory needs to focus more on local structures that viewers use to understand a documentary. In concentrating on broad categories of "mode," "voice," "function," or "form" that can distinguish a whole documentary, we have not paid enough attention to the distinctive ways the documentary spectator assembles nonfiction pieces into a coherent whole. Along the way I make a series of observations about the nature of documentary spectatorship, emphasizing not the "truthfulness," "authority," or "trustworthiness" of the film's approach but focusing on documentary viewing as a cognitive
sense-making process. As The Aristocrats dissects the elements necessary to tell one particular joke, I examine how we reassemble these parts into provisional segments that aid in comprehending the film’s structure and its discourse. This article does not present a top-down typology of how documentary spectators segment a film; instead it sounds the call for more critics to examine other local documentary structures to build a collection of segmentation practices that can cover a broad range of documentary devices. By examining The Aristocrats, I demonstrate the usefulness of such a bottom-up approach to cognitive cueing in nonfiction film.

**Documentary Theory and the Search for Categories**

Documentary theory and practice have been somewhat marginalized within contemporary media studies and filmmaking. Accordingly, much of documentary theory is concerned with differentiating between its object of study and the more dominant mainstream practice of fiction film. If fiction and nonfiction films both capture the world placed in front of the lens, how exactly do we define the difference between them? Documentary theory pays attention to what makes nonfiction film distinctive: its epistemology, both in the stance of the documentary filmmaker vis-à-vis the world and the assumptions made by the documentary spectator about the film’s “realism.”

Bill Nichols, for instance, asserts that the documentary film spectator approaches the world of the film through an emphasis on representation or exposition, as opposed to the fiction film spectator’s emphasis on narration. “At the heart of the documentary,” Nichols says, “is less a story and its imaginary world than an argument about the historical world” (1991: 111). Although he recognizes that fiction films make a kind of argument (and create representations and present exposition), Nichols situates a dichotomy between argument and narration at the center of his understanding of documentary. This emphasis on argument foregrounds the rhetorical structure of documentary, allowing him to trace a historical connection between earnest portraits of social institutions by John Grierson and Frederick Wiseman and the wisecracking irony of Michael Moore. Carl Plantinga (1997), on the other hand, believes that Nichols’s foregrounding of argument over narration is false, that documentaries use both in depicting a model of the actual world (a model he calls the “projected world”). Both theoreticians are making assertions about what distinguishes documentary from fiction and how nonfiction discourse is structured.

After delimiting the (admittedly slippery) concept of the documentary, theorists often turn to classifying the nonfiction film corpus into subcategories. Nichols has parsed the body of documentaries into four “voices” or “modes”: expository (authoritative documentaries in which filmmakers pres-
ent knowledge about the world with certainty), observational (documentaries that focus on capturing a more provisional, immediate sense of experience, influenced by direct cinema and cinema vérité), interactive (based on interviews between filmmaker and subject), and reflexive (accentuating the process of making the documentary and interpreting the world). Plantinga also prefers the term “voice” but distinguishes among three such voices: formal (explaining the world through classical form and closure), open (a more hesitant approach that explores rather than asserts), and poetic (emphasizing the aesthetics of the representations over their explanatory power) (1997: 106–119). David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson articulate two documentary film “forms:” the categorical (organized around presenting subjects and sub-topics) and the rhetorical (making an explicit argument) (2001: 114–128). Michael Renov (1993) uses verbs to articulate the four “functions” of documentary: to record, reveal, or preserve (the image of a historical artifact); to persuade or promote (a proposition); to analyze or interrogate (either the object of study or the process of filmmaking); or to express (through poetic depiction/arrangement).

By parceling out the documentary turf in different ways, theorists aim to map as much as possible of documentary filmmaking practice while also calling attention to the various sets of assumptions that guide viewer practices. Recognizing the “open” or “observational” voice of cinema vérité cues us to interpret a film as being somehow less manipulated and assertive than the authoritative voice-of-God portrayals of an “expository” or “formal” documentary. These categorizations are both theoretical models for use by critics and epistemological stances for everyday viewers. These various modes/voices/functions/forms make a difference partly because they can be sensed by audiences, allowing them to affect our emotional and cognitive assessment of the world being presented. Our emotional trust in the filmmaker and our intellectual assessment of the film’s epistemology depend on parsing the film to determine its approach.

This activity is undoubtedly important to the documentary spectator, underwriting the quality of our faith (or lack thereof) in the film’s veracity. And yet the emphasis on epistemology and classification has led us away from considering other crucial, distinctive activities of the documentary spectator. Determining a film’s mode/voice/function/form establishes useful global expectations for what kinds of imagery a documentary will present over all, but it does not help the spectator piece together the minute-by-minute unfolding of a documentary’s rhetoric. Trying to fit a film into these various categories is a useful exercise for both critic and viewer, but, as the case of The Aristocrats shows, this process is both slippery and ultimately less important to how we make sense out of documentary at the local level.
Unruly Aristocrats

The filmmaking approach of The Aristocrats is simple: interview a series of established comedians, asking each to retell his/her version of the world’s dirtiest joke. The joke structure itself is equally simple, little more than a setup and a punch line with an infinitely expandable space in between for elaborate improvisation. The setup is: a man goes into a talent agency to pitch a “family act.” Then the comic is free to make up the vilest performance possible, with mother, father, son, daughter, and other family members doing abominable things to each other, acts involving every imaginable configuration of orifices and bodily fluids. At the end of the debauchery, the astonished talent agent asks what the act is called, and the man replies (with a flourish), “The Aristocrats!” Five minutes into the film, we hear the first telling of “The Aristocrats,” a brief version by Jay Marshall, soon followed by a fuller version by George Carlin. Within just a few minutes of the film’s 89-minute running time, it has satisfied any curiosity that the film viewer brings to the theater concerning what the world’s dirtiest joke is. What follows is a series of variations and commentary.

This structure seems to fit quite readily within Bordwell and Thompson’s notion of categorical form. The filmmakers concentrate on one particular species of a genus (the dirty joke), developing that topic by providing more and more information. The Aristocrats progresses not so much by making a linear argument but by developing our knowledge of the topic bit by bit. “The challenge to the filmmaker using categorical form,” Bordwell and Thompson note, “is to introduce variations and to make us adjust our expectations” (2001: 115) This focus on form necessarily emphasizes the deeper structural concerns over the actual elements within the structure, accentuating the similarities in arranging documentary material on, say, Olympic divers or gap-toothed women.

But the actual documentary content itself is not purely neutral within the film’s formal structure. Instead, the documentary elements can potentially realign the spectatorial address, calling for a different viewing stance toward the film at a given moment. The members of the category primarily on display in The Aristocrats are jokes, elements that have a self-enclosed structural integrity. Repeatedly we see and hear different comedians deliver the setup, the full bravura elaboration of the joke’s middle portion, and then the punch line. We get a variety of versions: an Amish version, a genteel rendition (where the classy act is called the “cocksucking motherfuckers”), a ventriloquist version, a rendition with a marionette, one done with acrobatic pratfalls, one telling involves cards and sleight-of-hand, one from a pair of jugglers, one silent version from a street mime (Figure 1). The film justifies these complete tellings by saying that the fun of the joke is not in the punch line (which is admittedly somewhat lame) but in the journey of getting from setup to punch
line. As Jillette says, “In all of art it’s the singer, not the song,” providing an aesthetic justification for why we need to see and hear the complete renditions of these various joke artists.

As Donald Crafton (1994) has noted, the gag is an anti-narrative structure. The classical narrative form tends to push us consistently forward, presenting open questions that we anticipate will be answered in forthcoming scenes. Classical film scenes frequently are incomplete, leaving resolution to happen later in the film. The gag, however, disrupts the narrative’s forward pursuit for a moment of spectacle (like the production number in the film musical or the sex scene in hardcore porn). Crafton argues that feature-length comedy (unlike the silent comedy short) has domesticated the anarchic, narrative-arresting potential of the gag. Because The Aristocrats focuses on these self-enclosed structural elements, it limits the documentary’s potential narrative impulse.

The elements here are jokes of a particular sort: they are short narrative sketches. As I have argued elsewhere (1999), the sketch is different from the classical scene. Although they both take place in a continuous block of time
and space, a sketch is a freestanding independent unit that leaves no questions about what will happen next. Sketch comedy takes us outside the strictures of realism toward a foreground emphasis on performance. In the classical Hollywood cinema we expect different roles to be played by different actors, but in sketch comedy we expect that the same performers will be portraying entirely different characters in subsequent sketches. The limited cast and modular structure of a vaudeville show worked well with comedy sketches. These modules emphasize versatility over verisimilitude, highlighting the performer who could function within multiple modules.

_The Aristocrats_’s sketch structure further emphasizes the nature of its performances. Because the elements of the film’s categorical form are performances, it feels at times as if we are shifting into what Nichols calls the observational mode, the documentary voice that emphasizes the nonintervention of the filmmaker. We are close to the experience of the comedy concert film here, where we function as audience members watching Robin Williams, Steven Wright, Martin Mull, or Sarah Silverman perform their standup (or sit-down) version of the joke. One sits riveted watching Gilbert Gottfried’s legendary telling of “The Aristocrats” at a post-9/11 Friar’s Roast for Hugh Hefner (Figure 2). In _The Aristocrats_ the category element encourages us toward a spectatorial relationship characteristic of the performance film, a documentary format that has been little examined by scholars outside of

*Figure 2. Gilbert Gottfried’s legendary telling of “The Aristocrats” at a post-9/11 Friar’s Roast for Hugh Hefner.*
The type of documentary element presented encourages the documentary spectator of The Aristocrats to slip into Nichols’s observational mode as the comedians display their improvisatory skills for us, their audience.

Certainly the film’s consideration of how to perform this particular joke must raise the possibility of Plantinga’s poetic voice, with its emphasis on the aesthetics of the depicted object. Plantinga posits the poetic voice as a description to cover those documentaries in which aesthetic depiction trumps rhetorical assertion. The poetic voice is a mixed category including the poetic documentary, the avant-garde nonfiction film, the metadocumentary, and the parodic documentary (with each subtype emphasizing a different form of aesthetics). The Aristocrats seems to fit within his notion of the poetic documentary, films that foreground “not the dissemination of factual information but the sensual and formal qualities of their subjects,” (1997: 173) but the film does appear to be a far cry from other members of the category such as the city-symphony films or Joris Ivens’s Rain. The aesthetics being explored here are specifically verbal, unlike the visual subject matter of Bert Haanstra’s Glass or the audio-visual integration of Godfrey Reggio’s Koyaanisqatsi. We are asked to consider the formal qualities of joke performance in various permutations to evaluate whether certain nuances of delivery improve the humor (e.g., is “The sophisticates!” a better punch line than “The aristocrats”?). Upon hearing the novel ending, several veteran comics actually prefer it to the more familiar one). Is the fact that the elements presented are overtly aesthetic objects (jokes) enough to trigger the poetic voice, or is the most important factor the attention given to the joke’s aesthetics, or does the categorical form of the film’s structure dominate? Or does yet another documentary classification fit better?

In Nichols’s terms, the film most closely resembles the interactive mode (centered around the face-to-face encounter between filmmaker and subject), but it does so in a particularly slippery fashion. Often it appears to use what Nichols calls the “masked interview” (1991: 51), when the filmmaker is offscreen and unheard. We see and hear recognizable comedy figures from Don Rickles to Howie Mandel interacting with an unknown interviewer. Penn Jillette also appears as an interview subject (without any particular acknowledgment that his status differs from anyone else in the comic community). Alongside his longtime comedy/magic sidekick, Teller, he tells his own version of the joke (involving an exploding penis and a coke bottle) and provides commentary (Figure 3). This seems unproblematic until we begin to see and hear Jillette interacting with other comedians in the role of filmmaker. Much later we see him laughing with other comedians; Phyllis Diller collapses after hearing his rendition. In these moments he is obviously engaged in dialogue with the interview subjects, interacting with them, but then he slips into his other
role as onscreen comic or into the background as acting with other comedians in the role of filmmaker. Much later we see him laughing with other comedians; Phyllis Diller collapses after hearing his rendition. In these moments he is obviously engaged in dialogue with the interview subjects, interacting with them, but then he slips into his other role as onscreen comic or into the background as unseen filmmaker.

Jillette’s shifting status reminds us of how documentary classifiers from Bill Nichols to Carl Plantinga to Michael Renov caution that they are not engaged in an exercise in genre formation per se but in the articulation of more fluid concepts (mode, voice, impulse) that describe more limited sections of nonfiction texts. Nichols notes that his “modes” are “something like genres” (1991: 23) but instead are different concepts of historical representation that may coexist in time. Plantinga prefers to discuss his documentary “voices” as “heuristic devices” that “draw attention to some of the major functions of nonfictions” (1997: 106) rather than pure categorizations. Renov’s more polemic account takes a similar stance by describing the “tendencies” of documentary as verbs, as actions taken by filmmakers, not airtight categories (1993: 21). And yet once the theorists make these important statements about the limitations of their categories, they are relatively free to use these terms to apply to whole films. Regardless of the fact that theorists nuance their approaches, the power of categorization seems to win out. These concepts are indeed used to characterize entire films, eliding the shifts in address within a single documentary. Matthew Bernstein (1998) argued that the controversy caused by Roger and Me was partially due to that film’s tendency to slip without warning among various documentary modes, causing confusion in its claims to authority. The case of The Aristocrats points out how this slipperiness may characterize a broader range of documentaries, that this slipperiness may be more common than a more uniform structure.

There may be limits to which the time-honored notion of subcategories (however nuanced) can be used to capture the shifting nature of documentary address. My argument is more than an acknowledgment of the difficulties of classifying naturally occurring categories. Observation #1 is that the formal structure of the documentary elements themselves can be an unruly factor that
has the potential to transform the overall documentary structure. The anti-narrative nature of gags/sketches in The Aristocrats emphasizes the elements as performances, tending to shift us from a seemingly categorical form to a more observational mode. The elements themselves (jokes) seem to incline us toward understanding the film as poetic but in a way that seems at odds with the tradition of poetic documentary. The film initially appears to be in the interactive mode of interview documentaries, but then Jillette's variable status as interviewer/filmmaker/subject destabilizes this category as well.

The structural elements of documentary can be unruly, and this shifting landscape is what we should be charting in examining documentary construction. Broad considerations of documentary categories are insightful, but these insights have their limits. We need to build up a complementary set of documentary devices that are less global, more local than the notions of mode/voice/form/function. As I have argued elsewhere (Smith 2003), I believe that the way to proceed in laying out these devices is not through a top-down articulation of a grand syntagmatique but instead to map the breadth of filmmaking practice in piecemeal fashion, paying close attention to cueing in a variety of texts and to how they evoke cognition and emotion. Over time such an effort will produce a well-grounded set of documentary devices that filmmakers use at the local level of signification. This pursuit opens up a number of enormous questions to be pursued: how does documentary signal a shift from one form of address to another? What devices link documentary elements across the film’s shifting surface? In the remainder of this article, I will discuss a couple of the strategies that The Aristocrats employs to create a cohesive spectatorial position that is curious about how the documentary will unfold.

**The Documentary Spectator as Insider**

One key to understanding how The Aristocrats maintains interest through the repetitions of the joke is that it addresses the audience as insiders. “The Aristocrats” is a backstage joke, generally too filthy to be told onstage. It is told by one comedian to another as each tries to impress the other with his or her skill in elaborating on the set structure. Telling it well is a marker of distinction within a community. It is, as one comic says, “a secret handshake.” In its opening sections the film alerts us to the joke’s time-honored status within that community, thus letting us in on the secret. It builds our knowledge base, telling us who important behind-the-scenes figures in the community are (such as Improv club founder Joe Franklin). Then, when Sarah Silverman tells us that she actually was a member of the Aristocrats and that Joe Franklin raped her during private “rehearsals,” we get the joke. We’ve seen his office, heard him referenced as a touchstone by more familiar faces.
in that community, and so, by the time we hear Silverman’s story, we are positioned to get an insider’s payoff.

The film shows its interviewees without titles, putting us in the position of an insider who knows everyone in the community. Many of the faces indeed need no introduction: Robin Williams, George Carlin, and so on. Many others would be familiar to pop-culture fans, though those who aren’t comedy intimates might have trouble recalling their names until the closing credits reveal them (“Who was that guy from Hollywood Squares? Oh, yeah, Bruce Villanch”). Only a deep insider would know all the various writers and reporters in the film, but the film treats all these figures as if they are equally known to us, as if we are on the inside of this circle. Once on the inside, the film expects us to respond to the text with an insider’s curiosity. We now can deliberate on the joke’s illogic (after hearing about this disgusting talent act, why on earth would the agent ask what its name is? Why is this family so out of touch that it thinks this act is normal, commercial fare?). We can weigh which of several alternative constructions makes the best joke (does a “ta-dah” flourish of the hands help the punch line or not?).

This insider status is important to establishing a coherent spectator position for the text. As a participant within the community, we also are expected to evaluate the various performances, sift through the commentary from sage elder comedians, revel in novel interpretations of the joke. To do otherwise is to place ourselves outside that community, to put ourselves in the standup comedy audience where people tutored on TV sitcoms expect a quick tandem of setup and punch line instead of savoring the long delicious improvisation. The text gives us a quick education in comedy and then construes us as connoisseurs feasting on caviar that would be wasted on the general public. Penn Jillette, slipping in and out of roles in this community, models our activity, moving back and forth between interrogator, performer, and participant. It is no surprise, then, that the film ends with a Potemkin-like call to us comrades, encouraging us to go into the wide world and spread the joke to others, armed with the insider knowledge we have just gained.

Observation #2 is that a consistent spectator position is often crucial to suturing over the disparate, shifting modes of address in documentary. Unlike the notion of mode/function/form/voice, the unifying force is not the epistemological stance toward the world but the role offered to us in the world of the documentary. I am suspicious of creating a typology of such possible positions. Rather, I would encourage us to examine other texts to pay attention to how these positions are opened up. It may be true that “insider” is a relatively frequent spectatorial position for the documentary, given the temptation for a filmmaker to flatter us with the offer of a privileged entrée into a different world. And yet different films open up this invitation in different
ways, and these distinctions are important to documentary practice and theory.

**The Segmenting Spectator and the Conversational Turn**

A primary activity for this insider spectator in *The Aristocrats* is to parse the documentary flow into segments/sequences/syntagms. The film arranges its various tellings/commentaries into subtopics: is “The Aristocrats” a man’s joke, whether the term “aristocrats” has meaning in America, changing standards of decency, and so on. Our job is to recognize these sequences as the film shifts from one subtopic to another; in other words, to perform an on-the-fly segmentation.

The Appendix to this article presents a segmentation for *The Aristocrats*, and before I discuss one key segmentation technique in the film, I will briefly address a distinction between documentary and fiction film segmentation. Segmentation has fallen out of favor a bit in fiction film analysis, but perhaps this activity is more important in documentary film because the segments are not always so clear. Christian Metz’s (1976) instinct that the fiction film is syntagmatically poor and paradigmatically rich was right, so it would seem possible to catalog all possible fictional cinematic syntagms. It is not possible to do so with nonfiction filmmaking, which is not so bound by the unity of time and space (the basic parameters underlying the segmentation of fiction films). As Plantinga notes, “whereas the classical fiction film maintains unity of time and space within a sequence, the documentary is spatially more fluid, moving from place to place with an ease rarely seen in its fictional counterpart” (1997: 151). When previous nonfiction film scholars have used segmentation as a critical tool, they have tended to deal with films that have had relatively clear markers between segments and longish stretches of coherent space/time/action. Frank Tomasulo (following David Hinton’s lead) segments *Triumph of the Will* into thirteen parts, each one unified by clear actions of Adolf Hitler. Charlie Keil articulates *The Plow That Broke the Plains* into eight segments, all (but one) of which end in a fade-out. Bart Testa divides Stan Brakhage’s *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes* into ten sections, each one ending with a long veiling or withdrawal of the camera. These scholars have tended to use segmentation on texts that divide well into large units of space/time, on films that are either structured more along the lines of the spatiotemporal continuity of fiction filmmaking or films with clear formal signals (fades, tracking out) that overtly close chapters. In other words, critics have tended not to segment films that take large advantage of the documentary’s capacity to move widely in space/time, favoring documentaries that are more “classical” in construction. Classical preservation of time/space arguably plays a less significant role in contemporary documentary practice (outside of those who continue to follow the tenets of direct cinema/
A large number of documentaries (including *The Aristocrats*) range more freely; performing a segmentation on such films will in all likelihood produce a more elaborate result. Therefore the segmentation in the Appendix has significantly more than eight, ten, or thirteen sections. Breaking the film into smaller segments allows us to see more closely how the spectator is cued to distinguish one segment from another and then to connect them mentally. With few strong spatiotemporal or formal cues to use as a guide, the spectator of *The Aristocrats* must find an alternate means of making sense of the film's multiple parts.

When the spectator searches for coherence/unity in *The Aristocrats*, it can be found in the unity of the subtopic. This structure is not governed by the forward-looking vista of erotetic narration with its sharpened alternatives (either our heroes will be captured or they will escape); unlike classical fiction narration, it is more backward looking. There is no way to predict what is coming next. This doesn’t mean we lack expectations, but that those expectations are backward driven, that the documentary will continue to address a particular subtopic until we receive cues that it is changing topics. Here we’re talking about a higher-level activity than an Eisensteinian emphasis on the juxtaposition of images, in which the spectator asks what the following image has to do with the preceding one. The spectator also tries to determine if the next image fits within the subtopic category that currently governs her or his interpretation. As we receive new information in syntagmatic order, we mentally stack the new information onto paradigmatic piles until we receive data that seems to be in a new category, and then we begin a new paradigmatic pile.

Perhaps we should stop thinking of segmentation as a process of purely formal analysis by the critic. *Observation #3 is that segmentation is also a central activity of the documentary spectator.* Since everyone admits that documentaries change voice/function/mode frequently, perhaps we need to pay less attention to such categories and more attention to how documentary films change from mode to mode, to how the documentary spectator is signaled that a new segment has begun. Let’s pay attention to the devices used to navigate between documentary segments.

As an example, I propose one such device that is important to navigating the segments in *The Aristocrats*: the conversational turn. An interview clip begins, and the speaker is dealing with the topic at hand, but a new topic is mentioned by the end of the shot. It is not clear at the time that this is going to be a new topic, given the wandering nature of conversation, but it raises the possibility that we are shifting to a new focus. If this interview snippet is followed by a few more clips dealing with the new topic, it is clear that we have moved on, that we are in a new segment. For example, one segment involves a discussion of the Aristocrats as a historical joke. Hank Azarea
describes a version that he said his grandfather told him, and Howie Mandel says that his Polish grandmother told him the joke. Keeping in line with this family theme, Carrie Fisher tells us a version that involves her mother (actress Debbie Reynolds), her father Eddie Fisher, Mickey Rooney, and fisting. This is followed by a series of comics discussing how the Aristocrats is a joke about the good old days of show business, an era epitomized by Debbie Reynolds and Mickey Rooney. Carrie Fisher’s interview, then, functions as a conversational turn (Figure 4). Initially it appears to fit squarely within the subtopic of family retellings of the joke. Since Fisher’s family is a famous show-business family, however, this allows the filmmakers to turn our attention to another topic: the Aristocrats as a twisted nostalgic nod to a bygone time period. The advantage of the conversational turn is that it seems to ease the spectator “naturally” into the next segment. It appears that the interviewee has brought up a new subject, much as new topics appear naturally in conversation, and the filmmaker simply goes along. This conceals the filmmaker’s activity in piecing together disparate material, focusing attention back on the community of comics being portrayed.

This is certainly not the only way to introduce a new documentary segment. Documentaries created for American commercial television have a built-in
segment marker (the commercial break), and they often pose teaser questions just before this break to ensure that the audience will return for the next segment. As we noted earlier, some classical documentarians rely on overt formal devices such as fades to cue a segment transition, and some contemporary documentaries favor overt chapter announcements (think of Robert McNamara’s ten rules in The Fog of War, for instance). Others use a “hard” verbal declaration, in which a new topic simply begins without much warning. When The Aristocrats does this, it announces the new segment briefly. After a discussion by The Onion staff about whether gay-bashing and sodomizing Jesus would work in the joke, we cut to another comic telling us that some guys are made to tell this joke, and this brief introduction sets up a segment centered around one of the most elaborate versions from famously filthy standup comedian Bob Saget.

My point here is not to provide a comprehensive typology for such segment-connecting devices but to argue for the value of finding such devices in our consideration of documentary. I have articulated one such device here (the conversational turn), a structure that I believe has broad applicability across documentary practice. Again, I suggest that if we want to explain how particular documentaries structure their appeals, we should emphasize the importance of the segment. A broad understanding of the documentary’s type can help get the viewer into the theater, but once inside that theater, the spectator of a film like The Aristocrats structures the variations by segmenting the documentary flow.

The Aristocrats positions its spectator as an insider with corresponding knowledge and curiosity. It uses devices such as the conversational turn to cue the spectator to organize and unify the documentary elements. As such, it is exemplary of documentaries that do not depend on the two primary systems of narrative and rhetoric. We need to recognize that a great many documentaries do not depend on the forward-moving what-happens-next drive of narrative or on the persuasive force of rhetoric (in any strong sense of the word). We should acknowledge the importance of the backward-driven, segment-constructing, category-forming spectator in making films such as The Aristocrats work. If we as theorists do not pay more precise attention to the devices that such spectators use, the joke will be on us.

APPENDIX: THE ARISTOCRATS SEGMENTATION
2. Hearing the joke for the first time
3. Legendary versions within the comic community
4. The joke structure is explained (Jay Marshall)
5. The joke’s first full telling (George Carlin)
6. Vulgarity
a. Feces
b. Vomit
c. Bestiality
d. Family
e. Blood
7. Joke structure: what comes first
8. The joke’s illogic
9. Hand gestures
10. Mistelling the joke
11. Disliking jokes
12. Writerly versions of the joke
13. Is it a man’s joke?
   a. Women’s versions
14. The joke in previous eras
15. Personalizing the joke (“It’s the singer, not the song”)
16. Certain comics are made to tell the joke. Intercutting:
   a. Bob Saget’s version
   b. Including multiple perversions
   c. Mundane delivery
17. The weakness of the punch line
   a. The journey is important
18. Is the term “aristocrats” correct?
19. The joke as political statement
20. Historical versions
   a. Family retellings
21. It’s a joke about show business
22. Changing standards of decency
23. The Gilbert Gottfried version after September 11
24. Is new shocking content possible?
   a. Race
   b. Telling it in front of children
25. Jon Stewart says we shouldn’t break the joke down
26. Credits: Comics laughing
27. World’s oldest vaudevillian tells joke
28. Charge to the audience: Keep it alive, spread it around
Notes

1 The term “modes” (Nichols 1991, 32–75) is an update on Nichols’s previous typology of documentary “voice” (1983).

2 Even a more elaborate segmentation still simplifies the variety of documentary flow. Not every shot included in the documentary coheres within a well-organized segment. Sometimes a well-chosen line or a high-profile interviewee is included, even though the shot may not fit particularly well within the segment in progress. For instance, the filmmakers include current critical darling Jon Stewart refusing to tell the joke as part of a loosely organized section of comics giving personalized versions of “The Aristocrats.” In a segment on the joke’s structure, Pat Cooper looks directly at the camera and tells the filmmakers, “The joke sucks. You suck for having the idea of putting this on a documentary.” Segmentation necessarily makes the text appear more coherent by eliminating “noise.” An even more detailed segmentation would capture these outlying pieces of data, but the critic (and the viewer) must make trade-offs as they attempt to interpret the documentary flow.

3 Plantinga, following Teun van Dijk, calls this “discourse coherence,” arranging the documentary material into a sequence of propositions (1997: 151). I prefer the “subtopic” to the notion of “propositions” because The Aristocrats is not making formal assertions in the sense generally understood in argumentation.

4 Narration structured on a series of questions and answers.

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