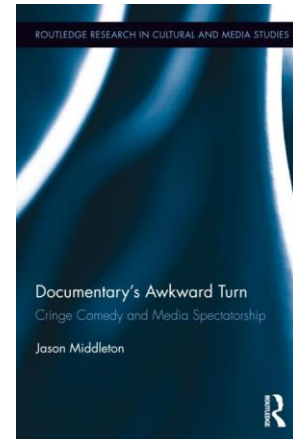


Jason Middleton, **Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship** (Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies), New York, NY: Routledge, 2013, 186 pp., \$116.62 (hardcover).

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In **Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship**, Jason Middleton examines the varied rhetorical uses of awkwardness in contemporary documentary film and reality-based media. Middleton's analysis is timely given the current popularity of awkward humor, or "cringe comedy," in contemporary television shows like *The Office*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Louie*, and *Modern Family*. Drawing on examples from American documentary film and media from the 1970s to the present, Middleton offers a highly readable, engaging, and sophisticated theorization of awkwardness, a mode of humor intuitively felt by many but logically explained by few.



Middleton locates the nexus of awkward humor in the relationship between filmmakers, documentary subjects, and viewers. Awkwardness, he claims, stems from moments of "rupture" or "unexpected shifts" in these relationships that expose the "differentials and misalignments in knowledge, affect, or desire among filmmakers, social actors, and viewers" (p. 5). Through the framework of this triad, Middleton considers the transformative implications of the awkward turn on the generic, formal, affective, ethical, and political landscapes of contemporary documentary media.

Middleton begins his analysis by looking at two filmmakers who employ awkward humor to great effect but to different ends: Christopher Guest and Michael Moore. For Middleton, *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) forms the bedrock of the contemporary mockumentary fad, providing the basic syntax of awkward humor for an entire generation of filmmakers. While Guest employs awkward humor to parody the subjects of his mockumentaries, he also uses it to satirize the form and style of observational documentaries, exposing the inherent awkwardness of the documentary encounter. Michael Moore, one of the most popular contemporary American documentary filmmakers, co-opts Guest's awkward syntax to serve political goals. For Middleton, Moore's use of awkwardness is rooted in shame. While Moore is well known for shaming his political adversaries through impromptu interviews, Middleton looks beyond Moore's intentional provocations to uncover subtler and perhaps unintentional strands of shame-based awkward humor at work. We frequently identify with Moore as our on-screen persona, yet the inherently disruptive nature of the awkward encounter has the potential to rupture our identification with the filmmaker and raise questions about the ethics of his methods.

Middleton follows up this discussion of unintentional awkwardness and reflexivity in his next chapter, which focuses on the creation of awkward humor through misunderstandings and misalignments between the filmmaker, subject, and viewer in documentary portraits of quirky and eccentric characters.

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While viewers are made to sympathize with the subjects of films like the Maysles' *Grey Gardens* (1975) and Chris Smith and Sarah Price's *American Movie* (1999), the disjunction between the filmmaker's perception of the subject and the subject's perception of him- or herself inevitably produces awkwardness. For example, Middleton devotes significant attention to the Maysles' portrayal of Little Edie in *Grey Gardens*, who befriends, flirts with, and confides in the filmmakers with no awareness of how ridiculous and sad she will be made to look in the finished film. The distance between how Little Edie sees herself and how we are made to see her through the Maysles' film is the source of much of the film's cringe-worthy humor. While this chapter raises some interesting ethical dilemmas associated with the aesthetics of awkwardness, it seems largely an aside in the scope of Middleton's overarching argument and detracts from his more engaging claims about the political efficacy of awkward humor in the documentary form.

Middleton's third chapter picks up where the first left off and looks at how awkwardness is once again mobilized for political ends in "prank" or "hoax" films. Here, Middleton turns to films like *The Yes Men* (2003) and the work of Sacha Baron Cohen in *Borat* (2006) and *Brüno* (2009) in which actors dupe subjects to create social satires. Like Moore, these filmmakers use awkward humor to advance a political rhetoric, but do so without the foreknowledge of their subjects. While the audience might side with the filmmaker or performer in these cases, in films like Banksy's *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) and Casey Affleck's *I'm Still Here* (2010), the viewers themselves are the subjects of the ruse, which can frustrate and even embarrass the uninitiated viewer by making him or her the butt of the joke.

In turning to the world of Internet media, Middleton focuses on the subgenre of "reaction videos" popular on sites like YouTube. These videos record the reactions of people as they watch disturbing, scary, or disgusting videos like "The Scary Maze Game" or "2 Girls, 1 Cup" intended to promote intense physical reactions. As we watch the people watching these videos become frightened, upset, or physically sick, we are encouraged to laugh, a disjunction between viewer and subject that, as Middleton points out, is the basis for much awkward humor. Unlike the political uses of awkwardness of Michael Moore or the Yes Men, here our affective response to the visceral reactions of the subjects prohibits substantive ethical engagement. This chapter is a valuable addition to the book as it broadens the scope of Middleton's investigation of spectatorship into the realm of affect and offers a scholarly analysis of a popular yet understudied genre of online videos.

Middleton closes his analysis with an examination of *The Office*, the television show that helped bring cringe comedy into mainstream culture and normalized for network television the mockumentary format popularized by Christopher Guest. Building on the work of Vivian Sobchack, Middleton adopts a phenomenological approach to demonstrate how the show makes the viewer "feel" the passage of time, building on our lived experience to amplify the impact of awkward humor. Middleton makes an important distinction between the British and American versions of *The Office* in relation to their use of awkward humor. For Middleton, the creators of the British *Office* employ awkward humor for subversive satirical ends that critique the soul-crushing monotony of the postindustrial workplace. In contrast, the American version tempers this satirical impulse with pathos that mediates the force of the original's biting satire and makes it more palatable to a wider broadcast television audience. "Rather than wanting to look away in shame," Middleton writes of the American *Office*, "we may find ourselves wanting to watch these moving and cathartic scenes again, and again" (p. 168).

Throughout the book, Middleton effectively deploys the multidimensional conceit of awkwardness to expose the disruptive potential inherent in the relationships among filmmaker, subject, and viewer. With relatively little in the field of documentary spectatorship to build on, Middleton should be commended for the innovative manner in which he brings theories such as psychoanalysis and phenomenology, developed from and typically applied to narrative fiction films, to bear on the documentary form. In addition to its contributions to the field of documentary spectatorship, the book represents a valuable addition to the study of contemporary comedy as well. The multimedia focus of the text makes it an appealing resource to scholars of cinema, television, and Internet media. Middleton's writing style is concise and accessible to a broad audience, from scholar to student.

Middleton achieves his primary goal of detailing the formal, ethical, and political dimensions of awkward humor in the documentary format. However, his choice of case studies at times seems artificially limiting. With the exception of the British version of *The Office*, Middleton restricts his focus primarily to American documentary film, video, and reality television. While awkward humor has certainly become a signature element of American comedy in the early 21st century, Middleton neglects to offer a compelling reason for his narrow national focus. If awkward humor has indeed become so prevalent in recent American documentary films, then a broader historical consideration of "why now?" and "why here?" would better contextualize Middleton's observations. Ultimately, *Documentary's Awkward Turn* is a valuable resource for anyone looking to better understand how awkward humor functions not only in the documentary format, but in contemporary American culture more broadly.