

**Angels, Stones, Hunters: Murder, celebrity and direct cinema**

**Aaron Taylor** *University of Lethbridge*

**Abstract**

Direct cinema's attempt to withhold itself from the world is ethically problematic. The helplessness of documentary subjects and audiences is underscored by this observational style. In *Gimme Shelter* – a concert film by Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin about the Rolling Stones and the fatal violence at the Altamont Speedway Free Festival – social actors are forced to submit to a representational frame they cannot 'see', let alone access. Moreover, the audience's own distance from the pro-filmic events is doubly assured: the filmmaker's policy of non-interference precludes and/or renders moot a viewer's impossible desire to intercede on the subjects' behalf.

**Keywords**

direct cinema

ethics

documentary

murder

celebrity

power

Becoming the object of a documentary camera's gaze entails a continual reconciliation of two competing impulses: submission (I yield to a degree of intrusion) and defensiveness (I maintain an inherently felt right to a degree of

privacy). To some extent, all documentary endeavours must contend with this inward negotiation, which is experienced by the social actors who consent to our desire for knowledge. Film-makers turn an active and penetrating look upon a particular subject through a powerful technological apparatus, which they alone wield. If this attempt to acquire knowledge can also represent a will to power, then a film-maker's consideration for his or her social actors' relationship to the look of that 'fearsome machinery' warrants axiological attention (D. A. Pennebaker, quoted in Levin 1971: 261).

In particular, the power dynamic between the observer and the perceived in the observational mode is especially fraught. Generally speaking, the principal aim of this mode is revelatory. Observational film-makers seek to record their subjects candidly in the hopes that a social actor will reveal a truth about his/her situation when s/he is not entirely conscious of the camera's presence. The most prominent exemplar of the observational mode is the North American movement referred to as 'direct cinema'.<sup>1</sup> However, its promise of apparently unmediated access to any event has been the source of some consternation. It has been argued that the films often position the audience in privileged positions as knowing subjects, whilst sidestepping the ethics of their unobtrusive candour. Bruce Elder's charge that direct cinema tends to be indiscrete, voyeuristic and sensationalistic is a typical example of such criticism (Elder 1989: 128).

And yet, the problems facing direct cinema film-makers – their apparent ethical ambivalence, alleged obfuscation of their own will to power and seeming unwillingness to acknowledge the motivations behind their own look – speak to a

pair of more fundamental ethical difficulties for documentaries in general, both involving helplessness. For what becomes clear in many canonical works of direct cinema is that (1) the social actors who are looked at often have little control over the frame of representation through which we observe them and (2) the audiences who look are unable to intercede on behalf of those who are observed.

These intertwining incapacities are most evident in two of direct cinema's recurring subjects: popular public figures and death. The most infamous convergence of celebrity and murder in the direct cinema canon occurs in *Gimme Shelter* (Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Zwerin 1970). A documentation of the Rolling Stones' 1969 American tour, *Gimme Shelter* indirectly illustrates the disparity between the power of public and private individuals to affect their respective representational frames. Despite its overtures towards creative interactivity, the film falls short of ethically informed self-awareness, and ultimately obscures the power dynamic between film-maker and subjects. Moreover, *Gimme Shelter*'s departure from the observational convention of a concealed apparatus is at best a facetiously ambiguous response to the viewer's helplessness before historical catastrophe. At worst, its reflexivity is merely an attempt to justify its exploitation of the footage that depicts the killing of a young concertgoer, Meredith Hunter, by a Hell's Angel, Alan Passaro, during the Altamont Speedway Free Festival.

### **Looking and ethical space**

One of the principal aims of this essay is to demonstrate that it is incumbent upon viewers to be responsive to the particularities of a documentary's

‘voice’. Bill Nichols defines the ‘voice’ as the audio-visual translation of a film-maker’s rhetorical perspective on the events or issue that s/he documents, which in turn stems from his/her direct moral and political involvement with the historical world (Nichols 2001: 44–45). In characterizing a film-maker’s distinctive ‘voice’, one attends to the stylistic choices s/he makes with regard to plotting, design, framing, staging, cinematography, editing, sound as well as his/her specific mobilization of modal conventions. It is this ‘voice’ that acknowledges our belief that the look of the camera does not simply disclose information but reveals the world’s hidden significance. Therefore, acts of looking in documentaries – both the mechanical operation of the camera and human perception – are never innocent; they embody a morally and ideologically loaded rhetorical argument about the world in which the film-maker is directly involved.

One’s awareness of the film-maker as a historically situated individual is cultivated through one’s attention to the quality of his/her rhetorical assertion expressed within the film. Richard Porton, for example, focuses on *Gimme Shelter*’s performance aspects and its complex plotting in order to situate ethically the presence of the film-makers. Although they literally appear in the film briefly, Porton characterizes the Maysles’ and Zwerin’s ‘voice’ by analysing the film’s non-linear plotting instead. He concludes that *Gimme Shelter*’s ‘circumambient structure’ is a sign of the film-makers’ ‘Apollonian detachment’: the Maysles and Zwerin refuse to provide summative explanations for the outbreak of violence and murder that they document (Porton 1988: 88). Thus, the presence and ‘voice’ of a

film-maker signifies his/her ethical and political commitment (or lack thereof) to the pro-filmic events in which s/he is engaged.

Beyond considering the ethical constitution of a film-maker's 'voice', one also needs to consider the moral implications of his/her attitudes towards the documented social actors s/he documents. As Nichols reminds us, a documentary is as much a record of a film-maker's regard for a subject with whom s/he is existentially connected as it is a preservation of the historical circumstances that it represents (Nichols 1991: 80). Therefore, one's analysis ought to consider the ethical implications of a film-maker's treatment of and relation to the subjects s/he records: their positioning of social actors within a rhetorical discourse; the means by which they obtain personal revelations; the specifics of the creative process (e.g. dictatorial or collaborative?); etc.

In *Gimme Shelter*, for example, Zwerin intercuts between footage of the escalating violence at Altamont, and the terse expressions of Mick Jagger and Charlie Watts as they watch the events unfold on the Steenbeck's viewfinder. For some, Zwerin's decision to record the Stones observing the Maysles' footage is not a gesture towards collaborative interactivity; it establishes an implicitly critical view of the band. David Sadkin, for example, argues that the strategy is undertaken in the interests of generating an 'atmosphere of self-delusion' (Sadkin 1971: 20). Through this strategic intercutting, the film-makers present viewers with images of a group of hubristic artists being confronted with a dire series of events that they should have anticipated, and perhaps even had a hand in causing to occur. Zwerin and the Maysles observe influential celebrities gradually coming

to a more complete comprehension of their radically ambivalent relationship with their audience.

Thus, documentaries provide audiences with the opportunity to assess an indexical record of a film-maker's regard for the social actors on view. The films use and expose the lives of actual individuals who share the same historical reality with both the film-makers who document them and the viewers who observe them. In other words, film-makers and audiences alike have a contiguous relationship with the space that is represented on-screen, and an existential bond with the social actors who exist in the same world as they do. To that end, documentary space is always-already inscribed as ethical space, and we owe a responsiveness and responsibility towards the film's subjects with whom we share a mutual existence – even if that subject is no longer living (Sobchack 1984: 294). As part of our duty of responsiveness towards documentary subjects, we critically assess a film-maker's indexical presence in or absence from the frame.

Such analysis is further justified by the fact that documentary film-making is as much a form of 'social interaction' as it is a creative activity (Pryluck 2005: 207). The artist's ability to control the frame of reference in which a social actor is represented requires the film-maker to exercise a duty of care towards the individual whose reality s/he shares. Film-makers are under an obligation not to misrepresent others in the service of an agenda or personal expressivity. By extension, viewers owe social actors a critical duty of care to take film-makers to task if they callously or intentionally manipulate their subjects – particularly if these subjects are anonymous and/or financially disadvantaged private

individuals.

### **Looking in direct cinema**

In order to appreciate better the various philosophies that inform the intertwining dynamics between looking, knowledge and power within direct cinema, one should first be cognizant of the two general forms of visual scrutiny that a documentary camera brings to bear on the pro-filmic events it observes. An *evaluative look* scrutinizes actuality in order to appraise, judge and make assertions about the subjects that are viewed. The politically informed rhetoric of expository films such as *The Spanish Earth* (Joris Ivens, 1937), *The Times of Harvey Milk* (Rob Epstein, 1984) and *No End in Sight* (Charles Ferguson, 2007) is mobilized in providing critical or advocative views of its subjects. The socially interrogative nature of this look is aligned with the spirit of investigative journalism. By contrast, a *revelatory look* explores actuality in order to discover a form of knowledge or truth within it. Robert Flaherty's work in *Nanook of the North* (1922) is a pioneering example, but this exploratory and non-judgemental view is most often associated with the observational aesthetic of direct cinema.

Whether a film mobilizes an evaluative or revelatory look, both instances raise their own particular ethical concerns. With regard to the subject at hand, what kind of ethical stance does the revelatory look take towards the social actors who are subjected to the director's representational frame? Or, for that matter, what is its stance towards the helplessness of the viewer in relation to the exposed – and suffering – social actor?

The ethics of direct cinema's revelatory look are incorporated within its

aesthetics. A direct cinema film-maker's mandate is to remain as unobtrusive as possible in order to catch a 'decisive moment', in which a preoccupied subject discloses a private truth about his/her present situation (Elder 1989: 114). The film-maker is in a privileged position to document this moment, for s/he quietly participates in the social life of a subject without intrusion. Ideally, his/her silent presence serves to bear respectful, 'objective' (read: 'neutral') witness to crucial moments in a social actor's life. Maintaining a policy of discretion and non-interference, the self-effacement of the direct cinema film-maker is not a form of emotional detachment, but an effort to achieve a dispassionately sympathetic distance. Direct cinema's self-effacing candour is thus intended as an act of solidarity with a subject, and disruptive, judgemental exploitation is to be avoided. The subject must be permitted to express his/her own truth, rather than be subordinated to a signifying position within a rhetorical discourse. As Albert Maysles describes the process, 'You lead a person from out of that person; in other words, there is something in that person that you draw out [...] It's another way of truly respecting [...] an individual that you are filming. We don't want to impose' (Zuber 2007: 16). Direct cinema film-makers therefore work through the ethical problem of creating a non-judgemental, communicative relationship with their subject.

Ever watchful for moments of revelation, direct cinema favours the unpredictability of what Stephen Mamber dubs 'the uncontrolled documentary' (1974). Film-makers eschew shooting scripts, production design and staged directions; instead, they aspire towards improvisation, 'artlessness', and

spontaneity. Remaining unobtrusive, film-makers aim to reduce the distracting and intimidating presence of the technical apparatus in order to set social actors at ease and to facilitate the fortuitous capturing of spontaneous drama. Direct cinema crews are minimalist, typically consisting of a sole camera person and sound recordist, and employ lightweight equipment designed for maximum mobility, location shooting under available lighting and the inconspicuous penetration of private space (often through a zoom lens). The most common technique that achieves the impression of unmediated access to the pro-filmic events is a combination of long takes and handheld tracking shots that follow and rapidly reframe dynamic action.

*Gimme Shelter*, for example, makes use of this technique during an extended sequence in which the Stones are observed listening intently to a working mix of 'Wild Horses' during a *Sticky Fingers* recording session at the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. The song is played in its entirety, despite the fact that it is not a performance moment in a concert context. However, one observes performativity of a different sort, as the band displays varying degrees of self-consciousness in their respective responses to the camera's look. Keith Richards closes his eyes, slouches back in his seat and coolly lip-synchs along with the vocals: a portrait of decadent repose. Watts, however, meets the camera's gaze head-on, matching its revelatory gaze with his own slow-burning stare. Taking in aspects of the scene in various long takes, Albert Maysles quickly reframes moments of edifying business: Jagger's impudent swig from a whisky bottle, Mick Taylor's surprised half-smile, the syncopated bobbing of Richards'

marvellous snakeskin cowboy boots. It is an important sequence in a film that confronts celebrity figures with troubling facets of their projected image and observes their resultant efforts to maintain a protective front.

Direct cinema is also a reactive documentary movement in its break with the didacticism of expository films. In keeping with observational mandates, direct cinema film-makers do not explicitly proclaim their rhetorical stances. Typically, they refuse to impose an explicit evaluation on the pro-filmic events they observe, or even to make a specific knowledge claim about it. By preferring revelation to exposition, direct cinema is heavily dependent upon our faith in the evidentiary value of the photographic image – that filmed images are an index to a truth about their absent referents. Viewers are invited to tease out the significance of the ambiguous action on their own accord without direction from instructive or evaluative rhetorical devices.

*Gimme Shelter's* own ambiguity – its reflexivity, fractured plotting and rhetorical opacity – is the source of frequent critical commentary. Stephen Mamber, for example, argues that the film's 'feelings of tentativeness, its own admissions of selectivity, are a virtue not shared by the authoritative tone of many documentary films' (Mamber 1973: 15). Avoiding a rush to judgement, the Maysles and Zwerin strive to keep the imposition of their own knowledge claims to a minimum, provide opportunities for the Rolling Stones to assert their own truth and generally do not lead the band to provide them with proof about themselves that supports a preordained idea. While tacitly critical of the Stones' role in the disastrous concert, they do not assume a position of superiority, nor

provide an explicit truth-claim that would allow the viewer to assume comfortably a moral high ground over the band. In other words, they seem to realize that the revelatory look can be an exercise in a film-maker's will to power. Whether this cultivated ambiguity represents an abdication of moral responsibility will be discussed shortly.

What are viewers expected to do, then, with the kind of knowledge that direct cinema claims to provide? Ultimately, it should be recognized that *Gimme Shelter* positions audiences as knowing subjects. Its style aims to provide the illusion of unmediated access to the events it observes, but even more importantly, its revelatory look at the Stones as they watch themselves has a crucial instructive function: it invites a group of celebrities to become more conscientious about how they are perceived by others. By extension, such a strategy is potentially important in the cultivation of viewers' empathetic faculties. However, it remains to be seen whether *Gimme Shelter* is truly able to live up to the ideals of direct cinema, offering viewers the means of testing their own subjective responses to events by imaginatively positioning them as observers and participants in an all-too real social world. It also remains to be seen whether the observational mode can adequately meet those ideals in the first place.

### **Observational problems**

Despite its various strengths, direct cinema's investment in non-judgemental ambiguity have left it open to a number of recurring ethical criticisms. One should be aware of the nature of these critiques – how they tend to

centre on direct cinema's hidden politics, openness to contradictory responses and ambivalence. Furthermore, one ought to consider the means by which the participatory mode – particularly *cinema vérité* – attempts to circumvent these problems. These solutions are helpful in understanding *Gimme Shelter*'s observational efforts to contend with the ethical dilemma of helplessness in documentary film.

The first problem lies in direct cinema's naïve perception of the camera as a 'scientific instrument' that allows for the objective, empirical observation of surface events (Winston 1993: 43). While this unquestioning faith in the evidentiary value of the photographic image seems innocent enough, it can actually be a serious obstacle to one's ability to obtain adequate knowledge about a situation. What is typically absent in direct cinema is a broader context within which images gain crucial connotative value. Instead, the image in and of itself is expected to yield up enough evidence for viewers to make up their own mind about a situation. In turn, politics and/or social significance of the situation are obscured (Winston 1995: 152).

For example, one observes Hell's Angels beating on hippy concertgoers with weighted pool cues in *Gimme Shelter*, but there is no acknowledgement of the circumstances that lead to the Angels adopting the role of 'security' at Altamont. Zwerin and the Maysles do not explain that the Angels' unofficial appointment was likely a feeble and naïve attempt by the Stones' tour manager, Sam Cutler, and Altamont co-organizer, Rock Scully, to contain and direct the motorcycle gang's violent proclivities (Booth 2000: 17). More importantly, there

is no consideration of the fundamental ideological differences between the two countercultural groups. *Gimme Shelter* does not address the class hatred, racial tensions or political antinomies that give social meaning to the hostilities between two radically different communities.

Aside from the quasi-scientific investment in photographic positivism, direct cinema's strategic ambiguity may result in contradictory responses that undermine its epistemic use-value. Because direct cinema invites viewers to form independently their own conclusions about the revelations to which they are privy, it risks forms of engagement that do not comfortably cohere with the movement's intended cultivation of respect and compassion. It is possible that one might come to empathize with a film's social actors, but one might also be involved formalistically in a kind of poetic immersion, or, simply take a superficially voyeuristic pleasure in the privileged views provided (Nichols 1991: 44).

*Gimme Shelter*'s deliberate complication of an elucidatory rhetoric that 'explains' Altamont, and its scrutinizing of oblivious faces invite conflicting responses. One might respond to Jagger with imaginative feeling as his pleas to the crowd to cease fighting largely fall on deaf ears, or experience a kind of sympathy for the devil as Jagger struggles to maintain a composed front whilst watching the footage of Hunter's murder. However, one might also simply not care about the social actors on display, and merely appreciate the aesthetic ingenuity of the film's complex plotting. Alternatively, one's indifference to the film's social actors might be manifested in a perverse thrill at the taboo images on

display. After all, it is a rare documentary that culminates in an actual homicide. As Pauline Kael cynically put it, ‘the violence and murder weren’t scheduled, but the Maysles brothers hit the *cinéma-vérité* jackpot’ (Kael 1970).

The final ethical critique of direct cinema centres on its claims to impartiality and empathy, which actually tend to result in a uniquely ambivalent look at its subjects – particularly when confronted with instances of human fallibility or wilful transgression. In such cases, film-makers are caught between two incongruous moral commitments: evaluation and neutrality. A documentary artist may feel obliged to provide an evaluative claim about a troubling situation, but at what point does this claim become an exemplification of his or her will to power? Contrarily, a proponent of direct cinema’s non-judgementalism may wish to respect a social actor by refraining from commenting about his/her failures or contraventions. And yet, at what point does their silence become an abdication of responsibility or even tacit complicity? Despite its underlying humanism and alleged respect for social actors, the strategic ambiguity of direct cinema may strike some as an insoluble problem.

*Gimme Shelter* is a cogent instance of this moral ambivalence. Despite their commitment to ambiguity, it can be argued that Zwerin and the Maysles assert their own will to power over the film’s rhetorical frame by offering up images of subjects for the viewer’s moralistic scrutiny. Although the film’s final assessment of the Altamont debacle is never made explicitly clear, a good deal of attention is paid to the social actors to whom various degrees of blame have been accorded. Consequentially, viewers might scan these images in order to assess

culpability.

For example, several sequences provide the opportunity to criticize the Stones' management and the concert's organizers. Despite the problems in securing a suitable location, few question the wisdom of moving the concert to Altamont Speedway – a treeless site without adequate sanitation, parking, security or barriers erected in front of the three-foot stage – a mere day before the festival was to take place. In fact, the cautions of promoter Ron Schneider ('You have no idea what goes on here. It's an amazing phenomenon. It's like lemmings to the sea') are more or less ignored. One of the organizers, attorney Melvin Belli, is last seen avoiding the camera's gaze, flummoxed by the news of the miles-long traffic jam.

Still, the film perhaps reserves its most intensive critical view for the band itself. Mick Jagger, in particular, is the principal target of the film's scrutiny. Unable to completely prevent their 'voice' from manifesting their own will to power, the film-makers later wrote that

<EXT>the structure of the film [itself] [...] tries to render in its maximum complexity the very problems of Jagger's double self, of his insolent appeal and the fury it can and in fact does provoke, and even the pathos of his final powerlessness.

<SRC>(Maysles and Zwerin 1971)</SRC></EXT>

Tellingly, the film-makers describe Jagger's 'diabolical' persona as a 'problem' that they recognize, but Jagger himself does not completely appreciate – hence his ultimate 'powerlessness' that may entice our pity.

As the film-makers are convinced that the singer's 'double self' is a channel for mass hysteria, they are at pains to capture the 'diabolical' nature of his charisma. During the 'Love in Vain' number, Jagger's hyperactive burlesquing is reduced to slow motion, and he is seen in multiple exposures, worshipped by the tightly framed faces to which Zwerin cuts. All are bathed in the unholy red wash of a filter, and the implication seems clear: the 'sinister invisibility' of the Stones' muscular rock is capable of whipping a crowd into violent automatons (Schowalter 2000: 95). Whether Jagger as a sole performer can actually possess 'control over [a] crowd', as Amy Taubin claims, and then 'lose' it is beside the point (Taubin 2000: 8). What appear to be revelatory looks are actually evaluative ones, with the film-makers themselves completely disregarding their own involvement in the events they film.

Even if one would rather not make too much of this weakened evaluative knowledge-claim as a sign of the film-maker's will to power, one still must contend with direct cinema's reticence to censure a social actor for his/her perceived moral failings. Vogels, for example, suggests that *Gimme Shelter* 'extends culpability beyond Jagger', but ultimately the film 'emphasizes that understanding the world means coping with the fact that much of the world is beyond understanding' (Vogels 2005: 95–96). While this may be true, one could also wonder if the Maysles' impression of the world's ultimate elusiveness is not just a convenient ethical cop-out. In the face of a debacle on the scale of Altamont, the film-makers' disinterest in engaging in explicit dialogue about culpability might strike some as a critical failure of nerve.

**Participatory solutions and celebrity watching in *Gimme Shelter***

It has been suggested that the observational mode tends to elicit contradictory responses, obscures the power dynamic between film-maker and social actor and/or takes an ambivalent (even unquestioning) stance on the imperatives that drive the camera's look. In keeping with these critiques, then, the participatory mode attempts to skirt direct cinema's problems with objectivity and power through an interrogative self-awareness.<sup>2</sup> An ethical auto-critique is a central component in the explicit textual workings of many participatory films, and of direct relevance here is whether *Gimme Shelter* attempts to make such self-conscious overtures by gesturing towards this mode. The central question, however, is if these strategies are genuine and adequate means of addressing the helplessness of social actors in an ethical fashion.

Among other things, *Gimme Shelter* is a film concerned with celebrity images, and their various production and reception contexts. For a movement interested in revealing the quotidian details of the everyday, direct cinema is frequently quite star struck. Many of direct cinema's canonical works are about public figures, including John F. Kennedy, Eddie Sachs, Joseph Levine, The Beatles, Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando, Bob Dylan and the Fischer quintuplets. The Maysles' own *Grey Gardens* (1975) draws a good deal of its pathos from the fact that the unvanquished women living in that dilapidated manor are the aunt and first cousin of Jacqueline Onassis. However, such a concentrated interest in celebrity is strategic, for it often allows direct cinema to sidestep the problem of the social actor's helplessness before the camera's revelatory look – his/her

inability to control the frame of representation in which s/he appears.

The observational mode continually runs into difficulties with its policy of non-interference, and its less-advertised cultivation of authorial expressivity. Frederick Wiseman, for example, insists on sole authorial power over 'his' material by denying his subjects veto rights and preventing them from previewing any footage (Halberstadt 1974: 22). By contrast, the participatory mode tries to address the power imbalance between film-makers and social actors by ensuring that subjects have a say in the construction of the representational frame in which they appear. Even if this collaborative ideal does not extend to an invitation to share directly in creative activity, the film-makers may grant social actors the right to define the limitations of personal disclosure, or even allow them veto power over the material.

The movement's interactivity is thus an expression of scepticism towards the objective 'purity' of documentary representations (Breitrose 1986: 47). Film-makers often actively collaborate with the social actors who appear in their films as a way of critiquing direct cinema's quasi-ethnographic belief that the medium is transparent and can give us direct insight into a subject's mind (Rabinowitz 1994: 20). For example, the *cinéma vérité* classic, *Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961), shows its social actors attending daily rushes, and includes their critical comments about how they are depicted. Here, the subjects actively critique the frame of representation in which they appear – a refutation of the social actor's helplessness before the camera's revelatory or evaluative looks.

Furthermore, the foregrounding of the film-maker's own specific and

situated 'voice' is the means by which *cinéma vérité* compensates for direct cinema's contextual obscurantism. The participatory mode tries to present both the film-maker and subject as specific individuals by stressing their interaction within a specific context. Most pertinent is the revelation of the film-maker as a particular identity, rather than an omnipotent and authorial 'voice' whose identity is disguised (Lutkehaus and Cool 1999: 119). Such a strategy acknowledges the rootedness of one's 'voice', and does not posit a transcendent 'truth' about a situation that would only separate the knowing film-maker from the unknowing subject.

Representing actuality without comment, then, is not enough; documented bodies need contextualizing and history needs to be acknowledged as a referent. Participatory film-makers are said to serve as 'catalysts' for the action they film, and subsequently, they foreground the equipment used to record this action (Barsam 1992: 303). Thus, interactive approaches include the extensive use of conversational interviews; on-screen revelation of the recording apparatuses; the direct address of the subject and film-maker to the camera; even the relinquishment of control over the apparatus altogether by providing subjects with the means to document themselves. With its camera as a participant rather than an invisible observer, and its film-makers as 'provocateurs' rather than unobtrusive bystanders, the participatory mode opened up the observational 'voice' to politicized strategies of self-acknowledgement (Barnouw 1993: 255).

In the spirit of documentary film-making as a form of 'social interaction', then, it might appear that *Gimme Shelter*'s reflexive strategies obliquely address

the issue of misbalanced power between film-makers and subjects. Potential participatory techniques include the strategy of filming the Stones as they watch the footage being edited (giving them the opportunity to view themselves), as well as providing glimpses of various crew members. David Maysles and Zwerin are even seen briefly, working at the Steenbeck, and the former explains their proposed editing strategy to Watts: '[We'll show] all you guys watching [the footage]. We may only be on you for a minute. Then go to almost anything.' This reflexivity seems entirely in keeping with the film's interest in staging a tacit confrontation with celebrity. *Gimme Shelter* provides a view of social actors struggling with their own awareness of the camera's inquisitive look, just as the camera struggles with the impassivity of those faces as they withhold themselves from a look that expects revelation. On the one hand, then, the film's reflexivity tacitly addresses documentary film-making's core power dynamic between the looker and the observed.

On the other hand, however, the film-maker's decision to include footage of the Stones' visit to the editing suite also smacks of expediency. For the Stones are far from helpless documentary subjects. Zwerin and the Maysles were quite aware of the band's power as a corporate entity able to exercise legal control over the use of its image. Indeed, the more affluent and influential social actors are as public figures, the more likely they are to obtain veto rights over a documentary's content. The Maysles had granted Hollywood producer Joe Levine veto power over *Showman* (1962), and other direct cinema film-makers likewise extended similar rights to the celebrities they filmed: the Kennedy administration, for

example, set strict limits on what the Drew Associates could film in *Crisis* (1963), and John Lennon had veto rights over Pennebaker's 1971 concert film, *Sweet Toronto* (Pryluck 2005: 202; Saunders 2007: 28). *Gimme Shelter*, then, unintentionally underlines the privileges accorded to public figures with the economic power to exert influence on how their self-image is appropriated and represented.

In this light, inviting the Stones to the editing suite seems a canny attempt to 'involve' them in the process – especially since *Gimme Shelter* was commissioned as a promotional film about the band's 1969 tour. The Stones had a considerable financial investment in the film: they had paid the Maysles \$14,000 for filming the Madison Square Gardens concert featured in the first half of the film, and an additional \$129,000 for their work at Altamont (Sragow 2000: 3). Certainly, the Stones were also less likely to be litigious if the Maysles kept up the pretence of transparency. Although a leery Jagger took six months to sign releases, the band ultimately did not exercise their veto rights (Goldstein 1998). They would not be so compliant during their next documentary project: the Stones filed an injunction to bar the release of Robert Frank's film about their 1972 tour, *Cocksucker Blues* (1972), which featured scenes of coke snorting, heroin shooting, hotel balcony TV-tossing and groupie masturbation.

There is, however, some controversy over the ending of *Gimme Shelter*. It is unclear who made the decision to cut away from the freeze frame of Jagger – which was initially supposed to end the film – to shots of concertgoers struggling away from Altamont into the morning sun. In one account, it was Zwerin who

decided that she did not want ‘the finger pointing squarely at Jagger’s nose’ and chose to roll the credits on the departing crowds (Vogels 2005: 94). In another account, however, Stanley Goldstein – a prominent crewmember – claims that the substitution was made at Jagger’s behest (Goldstein 1998). The difference is important: the former account implies an intentional effort to maintain observational ambiguity; the latter account implies an enforced whitewashing of a celebrity’s culpability.

In sum, the film-makers were not worried about exploiting the Stones in the same way that they exploited the anonymous private individuals who appear in the film. And while the band members are not always on their best behaviour, many of the concertgoers appear in an even worse light. *Gimme Shelter* often objectifies Schneider’s ‘lemmings’ at Altamont as mere transgressive bodies. Only rarely do they meet the camera’s look, as when an occasional peace sign is flashed at the camera, or when a whacked-out young man embraces a bemused sound recordist. More often, the camera simply gawks. We bear witness to frenetic jiving; young men urinating against a wall; a naked, heavy-set woman who tries to mount the stage. In short, the concertgoers are there to gape at celebrity, and to be ogled in turn by the camera. The film never even identifies Hunter by name, he is just another anonymous, abstracted, victimized body and subjected to a scrutinizing gaze. Only the Stones are accorded the privilege of interactivity. Certainly, no invitations to watch the rushes were extended to any of the band’s besotted fans. Interestingly, a strategic attempt to screen footage for the other major organization in the film – Hell’s Angels – had unforeseen and

unfortunate consequences for the film-makers, allegedly including a physical assault on cinematographer David Myers and attempts at extortion (Goldstein 1998).

As a final indication of the film's compromised interactivity, the Maysles fail to disclose fully their own role in the Altamont debacle – specifically, their influence over the concert's location. Due to a dispute over distribution rights to *Gimme Shelter*, the concert's location was changed from Sears Point in Sonoma to Altamont Speedway in Alameda County (Cheshire 2000: 36). Filmways Inc. owned Sears Point racetrack and made the theatrical distribution of the film a condition of the concert organizer's use of the site (Goldstein 1998). In his role as the film's producer, David Maysles refused, but consequentially, the hasty and ill-planned move to Altamont is probably one of the primary causal factors in the ensuing disaster. The relocation took place a mere 30 hours before the event was scheduled to begin. Perhaps the chaos might still have occurred at a more organized event, but the Maysles' lack of full disclosure about their relation to the pro-filmic events they are 'merely observing' is problematic – especially in a film preoccupied with scrutinizing individuals, as if to sniff out culpability.

These critiques of *Gimme Shelter*'s problematic reflexivity have not simply been mounted in order to suggest that the participatory mode is more 'ethical' than the observational mode, and that the desire to 'objectively' reflect actuality is a regressive strategy. Rather, it is more essential for audiences to scrutinize closely a documentary's seeming interactivity. In *Gimme Shelter*, then, Zwerin and the Maysles do not actually provide a robust account of the quality of

the revelations that materialize. As for the private individuals that appear as social actors, they have little recourse in protecting themselves from their particular rhetorical placement within an observational frame. Such helplessness, however, is not experienced by public individuals with substantial financial resources, who are often accorded special treatment by the film-makers in need of their cooperation. In the end, the power discrepancy between those who control the look and those who are positioned to be looked at is even more pronounced in observational documentaries that focus on celebrity figures.

### **Observational glimpses of murder**

Given direct cinema's policy of non-intervention, objectivity and unobtrusive looking, the helplessness of viewers watching the suffering of a social actor in an observational film is particularly pronounced. When direct cinema provides views of physical anguish or even death, there is a danger for the film-makers that their cool distance might appear like callous disregard. Or, even worse, this detached view might simply emphasize the subject and viewer's mutual helplessness to an even greater degree. *Gimme Shelter* 'climaxes' with a glimpse of an actual killing, but the film is also concerned with how the film-makers, the Rolling Stones and the audience come to confront death. On the one hand, the film-makers have rightly denied their participation in staging a killing (Maysles and Zwerin 1970). On the other, they do seem cognizant of the propriety of filming Hunter's murder and try to construct a complex justification for its inclusion in the film. Therefore, the camera's revelatory look requires a careful evaluation of its nature and quality.

To begin with, *Gimme Shelter* is neither the first, nor the last work of direct cinema to contend with the representation of death. Other examples include *The Chair* (Robert Drew, 1962), *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman, 1989) and *Dying at Grace* (Allan King, 2003). Documentary films such as these inevitably develop aesthetic strategies that contend with these images. Invariably, the ‘raw’ footage that contains this ultimate emblem of helplessness becomes formalized. That is, the film-maker imposes his/her distinct ‘voice’ upon the troubling material in order to contemplate its larger social meaning. Particularly in documentaries that contend with historical atrocity, audiences are aesthetically removed from direct contact with the violent unspeakability of taboo images. One undertakes a kind of ‘mediated contemplation’ as a consideration of death with various ethical justifications (Sobchack 1984: 299).

*Gimme Shelter*’s gaze at death qualifies as ‘accidental’ according to the taxonomies laid out by Bill Nichols in *Representing Reality* (Nichols 1991: 82–89). Its suddenness differs from: the ‘helpless gaze’ at the bloody butchery of the animals that are slaughtered in the abattoirs represented in *Blood of Beasts* (George Franju, 1949); the ‘endangered gaze’ of Leonardo Henrichsen, who films the very soldiers that kill him in *The Battle of Chile* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975–76); the politicized ‘interventional gaze’ of Barbara Kopple and her crew as they draw fire from strikebreakers in *Harlan County, USA* (1970); and the unblinking ‘humane gaze’ that empathetically maintains a physical closeness to the patients in palliative care who live out their final days in *Dying at Grace*. In instances of the ‘accidental gaze’, however, violence comes as a shock for which the camera is

unprepared. As in the Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination, our own inadvertent look at the murder in *Gimme Shelter* is justified by curiosity: how could this have happened? Indeed, the accidental gaze becomes the subject of scrutiny towards the end of the film, as it shifts from its usual observational techniques and brings to bear an intense reflexive concentration upon Baird Bryant's footage of Hunter's murder.

Hunter's death occurs at the end of a concert sequence, during which time Zwerin has not cut back to the Stones watching the footage in the editing suite for almost thirteen minutes. Thus, viewers have been immersed in direct cinema's 'present tense' style for a long period of time. As Jagger finishes 'Under My Thumb', he is framed in close-up, and suddenly looks left towards some unseen off-screen space – thus priming the viewer for the event that immediately follows. Zwerin cuts to a fight breaking out in a high-angle long shot, and Bryant zooms in to a medium shot and refocuses. Hunter stands out in his lime green suit and is pushed forward into the light cast by one of the stage's arc lamps. The scream of his girlfriend, Patty Bredehoft, is caught by a nearby mic, and can be heard over the crowd's frightened babble. Passaro lurches at Hunter with his knife plunging downwards into the boy's back, and both fall out of the impromptu spotlight. The crowd surges in for a better look, and even bassist Bill Wyman cranes forward from the stage in the foreground. Bryant finally pans back to the stage when nothing further can be seen.

Abruptly, however, this 'first-person' view is interrupted by a revelation of the shot's status as a recorded image. Jagger's voice-over suddenly intrudes,

and he asks David Maysles to ‘roll back on that, please’. Zwerin then cuts to Jagger sliding up closer to the Steenbeck, and Albert Maysles reframes the singer in medium close-up. Another cut reveals the viewfinder as David spools the film backwards to the end of the song. The footage fills the screen once more and begins to play out in slow motion until Passaro comes into contact with Hunter. David pauses the image at the height of the knife’s arc, and holds it as Jagger studies the shot for evidence of Hunter’s gun. Again, David rewinds the film and pauses on an earlier frame in which the gun can vaguely be seen outlined against Bredehoft’s crocheted skirt. The footage moves forward again and is paused as Passaro’s knife descends. Maysles’ visible evidence seems to call for some kind of response, and so, Jagger is heard in voice-over once the image begins to play again. ‘It’s so horrible,’ he says quietly, and Zwerin cuts to a close-up of Jagger watching the footage continue. Albert then subtly pushes in even closer to Jagger’s impassive face.

What are the reasons for revealing the apparatus at this moment? Perhaps this is an ethical attempt to minimize sensationalism – to transform a shocking accidental gaze at murder into a more palatable helpless one. Therefore, the sudden revelation of the viewing situation can come as a cognitive shock to one who has been immersed in the act of watching a genuine killing unfolding in real time. One realizes that one’s experience of the murder is secondhand (one watches what Jagger and Maysles are watching). This baring of the device is presented as an interruption to observational immediacy, and thus circumvents the morally indefensible pleasure one might feel by participating in the illusion of

unmediated ('actual') murder. One is reduced, like Jagger, to a helpless observer who is powerless to prevent Hunter's death.

A second and more likely reason is that *Gimme Shelter* is more interested in observing Jagger's reactions to the footage than it is in the murder itself. Viewers are invited to assess the singer's response to disaster, and the film's minimized mediation and detachment encourages audiences to arrive at an implicit truth themselves. The crucial question, however, is why does the film provide these views? What are viewers hoping to learn in watching *Gimme Shelter*, and what is the ultimate nature of the knowledge it provides? Are these revelatory looks sympathetic, asking one to feel pity for Jagger's helplessness? Perhaps they encourage an empathetic view, in which one imagines how it might feel to become aware of the unintended results of your own irresponsibility. Or, do the film-makers reflexively prompt a viewer to question his/her own motives for looking, hinting at the ideological implications of their status as detached onlookers?

Although the character of the film's knowledge is left somewhat ambiguous due to the openness of direct cinema, *Gimme Shelter*'s judgement is not entirely inconclusive. Rather, it struggles with a fundamental ambivalence in the face of the transgressions it documents, unsure of which ethical imperative to pursue – evaluation or neutrality. Given the film-makers' own undisclosed direct involvement in Altamont, however, such ambivalence seems less a matter of innovative modernism than it does moral disingenuousness, or even evasion.

### **Some conclusions**

It should be clear that documentaries are a record of a film-maker's regard for the subjects that s/he observes. The camera's gaze communicates a film-maker's political intentions and moral values. For this reason, one needs to be keenly attuned to the nature of the film's look – be it evaluative or revelatory – and consider whether the rhetorical assertion of a knowledge-claim that accompanies this look might also be an implicit assertion of power over a subject.

The case of *Gimme Shelter* serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness between documentary aesthetics and ethics. As Calvin Pryluck notes, a film-maker's decision to employ specific modal conventions can materially affect the social actors with whom s/he works (Pryluck 2005: 195). In keeping with the observational mode's commitment to ambiguity, non-intervention and transparency, direct cinema can unintentionally reinforce the helplessness of the social actors who are subject to a film-maker's representational frame, and the helplessness of viewers who are unable to intercede on the subjects' behalf. Direct cinema's examinations of celebrity and death are particularly problematic, ethically speaking. They often foreground the movement's tendency to obscure the power dynamic between the film-maker and subject, its penchant for inviting contradictory responses and its ambivalent position towards moral neutrality and judgementalism. One comes to *Gimme Shelter* for the confluence of stardom and murder, and leaves troubled by its moral evasiveness – its willingness to penetrate the world and then let it bleed.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank James Dobbie for his kind assistance in preparing this essay and

my former students in the Documentary Ethics class I taught in 2007 at Brock University. Their insights into and enthusiasm towards this particular subject were inspirational.

This essay is dedicated to Sean Worrall, who helped me learn that if you try sometimes, you'll find you get what you need.

## Notes

### References

Barnouw, E. (1993), *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*, 2nd edn, New York: Oxford University Press.

Barsam, R. M. (1992), *Non-fiction Film: A Critical History*, 2nd edn, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Booth, S. (2000), 'The true adventures of Altamont', in *The Rolling Stones, Altamont & Gimme Shelter*, DVD insert booklet, New York: The Criterion Collection, pp. 10–19.

Breitrose, H. (1986), 'The structures and functions of documentary film', *CILECT Review*, 2: 1, pp. 43–56.

Cheshire, G. (2000), 'The Demonic Charisma of *Gimme Shelter*', in *The Rolling Stones, Altamont & Gimme Shelter*, DVD insert booklet, New York: The Criterion Collection, pp. 34–39.

Elder, B. (1989), *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Goldstein, S. (1998), 'Written response to "candidates for the national film registry: *The Wild One* and *Gimme Shelter*"', *National Film Preservation Board*, 10 November 1998, <http://www.loc.gov/film/goldstein.html>. Accessed 1 July

2009.

Halberstadt, I. (1974), 'An interview with Fred Wiseman', *Film-makers Newsletter*, 7: 4, pp. 19–25.

Kael, P. (1970), 'Beyond Pirandello', *The Documentary Blog*, 10 September 2007, <http://www.thedocumentaryblog.com/index.php/2007/09/10/pauline-kael-vs-gimme-shelter>. Accessed 1 July 2009.

Levin, G. R. (ed.) (1971), 'Interview with Donn Alan Pennebaker', in *Documentary Explorations: 15 Interviews with Film-makers*, Garden City: Doubleday, pp. 221–70.

Lutkehaus, N. and Cool, J. (1999), 'Paradigms lost and found: The "crisis of representation" and visual anthropology', in J. M. Gaines and M. Renov (eds), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 116–39.

Mamber, S. (1973), 'Cinéma Vérité and social concerns', *Film Comment*, 9: 6, pp. 9–15.

——— (1974), *Cinéma Vérité in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Maysles, A., Maysles, D. and Zwerin, C. (1971), 'A response to Pauline Kael', *The Documentary sBlog*, 10 September 2007, <http://www.thedocumentaryblog.com/index.php/2007/09/10/pauline-kael-vs-gimme-shelter>. Accessed 1 July 2009.

Nichols, B. (1991), *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

——— (2001), *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Porton, R. (1988), 'Gimme Shelter: Dionysus at Altamont', *Persistence of Vision*, 6, pp. 83–90.

Pryluck, C. (2005), 'Ultimately we are all outsiders: The ethics of documentary filmmaking', in A. Rosenthal and J. Corner (eds), *New Challenges for Documentary*, 2nd edn, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 194–208.

Rabinowitz, P. (1994), *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*, London: Verso.

Sadkin, D. (1971), 'Gimme Shelter: A Corkscrew or a Cathedral?', *Film-makers Newsletter*, 5 December, pp. 20–27.

Saunders, D. (2007), *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties*, London: Wallflower Press.

Schowalter, D. F. (2000), 'Remembering the dangers of rock and roll: Toward a historical narrative of the rock festival', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 17: 1, pp. 86–102.

Sobchack, V. (1984), 'Inscribing ethical space: Ten propositions on death, representation and documentary', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 9: 4, pp. 283–300.

Sragow, M. (2000), 'Gimme Shelter: The true story', *Salon*, 10 August, [http://archive.salon.com/ent/col/srag/2000/08/10/gimme\\_shelter/index.html](http://archive.salon.com/ent/col/srag/2000/08/10/gimme_shelter/index.html).

Accessed 1 July 2009.

Taubin, A. (2000), 'Rock and Roll Zapruder', in *The Rolling Stones, Altamont &*

*Gimme Shelter*, DVD insert booklet, New York: The Criterion Collection, pp. 5–8.

Vogels, J. B. (2005), *The Direct Cinema of David and Albert Maysles*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Winston, B. (1995), *Claiming the Real*, London: BFI Publishing.

——— (1993), ‘The documentary film as scientific inscription’, in M. Renov (ed.), *Theorizing Documentary*, New York: Routledge, pp. 37–57.

Zuber, S. (2007), ‘The force of reality in direct cinema: An interview with Albert Maysles’, *Post Script*, 26: 3, pp. 6–21.

#### Suggested citation

Taylor, A. (2011), ‘Angels, Stones, Hunters: Murder, celebrity and direct cinema’, *Studies in Documentary Film*, 5: 1, pp. 1–34, doi: 10.1386/sdf.5.1.1\_1.

#### **Contributor details**

Aaron Taylor is assistant professor in the Department of New Media at the University of Lethbridge. Some of his recent publications include reflections on the supporting player in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (2012), theatrical performance styles in *Stages of Reality: Theatricality in Cinema* (2011), Adam Sandler in *Millennial Masculinity* (2011), melodramatic villainy in *The Journal of Film and Video* (2007) and superhero bodies in *The Journal of Popular Culture* (2007). He is currently writing a study of *It’s a Wonderful Life* for Wallflower Press’ *Cultographies* series, and is editing an anthology of essays on screen acting and film theory.

Contact: Aaron Taylor, Department of New Media, Centre for the Arts W864,

University of Lethbridge, 4401 University Drive, Lethbridge, Alberta, T1K 3M4,  
Canada. E-mail: aaron.taylor2@uleth.ca

---

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘direct cinema’ was coined by pioneering film-maker Albert Maysles to describe his film-making technique. It has since been used to refer to the North American style of observational documentaries that emerged in the mid-1950s. Major figures within this movement include Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, Albert and David Maysles, Frederick Wiseman and Canadian film-maker Allan King.

However, the movement has confusingly been referred to interchangeably as ‘direct cinema’ and ‘*cinéma vérité*’ by writers and film-makers alike, despite the fact that these are two different and culturally specific movements (American and French, respectively) belonging to two different documentary modes (observational and participatory, respectively). Therefore, the phrase ‘direct cinema’ will be used here as a matter of convenience, and will refer (mainly) to the American observational style.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of celebrated styles in the participatory mode include the French *cinéma vérité* and Québécois *cinéma direct* movements. Canonical figures include Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin, Chris Marker, Agnes Varda, Michel Brault and Pierre Perrault.