CONTEMPORARY FILM DIRECTORS

Albert Maysles

Joe McElhaney

Maysles brothers thought about their own work as it created, through its enormous critical and financial success, a legitimate cultural space within which the implications of their cinema could be more extensively pursued. Three years later, the release of *Salesman,* a film that focuses on the lives of four "ordinary" Bible salesmen rather than the celebrities or political figures of their earlier films, allowed Albert and David Maysles to realize this dream of the nonfiction feature. While acclaimed in certain quarters, many adherents of a pure direct-cinema approach (presupposing that such a thing exists) were critical of *Salesman,* finding it overreliant on conventional Hollywood dramatic structure.

Other controversies arose in relation to their two subsequent films, *Gimme Shelter* and *Grey Gardens.* While *Gimme Shelter* was originally intended to be little more than a commissioned project to film the Rolling Stones on tour, the sudden eruption of violence and murder in the midst of the culminating concert of this tour at Altamont Speedway in California inevitably resulted in a very different kind of film. *Gimme Shelter* was criticized for being everything from a reactionary, anti-youth film to a self-aggrandizing, self-mythologizing work. *Grey Gardens,* a film about Edith and Edie Beale, respectively the aunt and cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy, only intensified the anti-Maysles discourse. It was felt by many that the Maysles brothers had exploited the two women, living in poverty in a run-down, once-glorious home on Long Island.

Grey Gardens was the last Maysles film to generate such an intense response. Since then, Albert Maysles—up through his brother's sudden death in 1987 and then afterward with such collaborators as Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson, Muffie Meyer, Ellen Hovde, and Antonio Ferrara—has shot largely commissioned work, primarily films about artists and classical-music celebrities as well as television commercials, all of which help to generate revenue for Maysles Films, Inc. While many of these later films have been critically acclaimed and received numerous awards, the excitement and controversy that once surrounded the appearance of a new Maysles film has died down. Nevertheless, the Maysles brothers' early work continues to be vital, and Albert Maysles maintains a strong, if not iconic, and very public presence within the documentary field, still firmly committed to the goals of the documentary cinema that he helped to establish with his brother.

III

This overview of Maysles's life and career contains certain threads that will be central to the arguments I will be making about the films. The first is the specificity of Maysles's origins: Jewish working-class in a predominantly Irish Catholic neighborhood in the Boston area, with an extremely close relationship to a younger (and, by all reports, more charismatic and colorful) brother, and with an interest in psychology that eventually translated into a larger fascination with the moving image. Boston is a primary setting or reference point for several Maysles films: *Showman, Salesman,* and *Ozawa* (1985). The city's identity was historically rooted in an English Puritan tradition, but the influx of Irish Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century gradually moved its politics away from conservative Republican to liberal Democratic, a political makeup that the city maintains to the present day and of whom the Kennedys (the subject of *Primary* and major unseen figures in *Grey Gardens*) remain its most notable examples.

Boston is strongly marked by the presence of such major figures in progressive American literary and philosophical history as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Louisa May Alcott. It is also a region historically shaped by its immigrant population, not only the Irish but also Italians, Russian Jews (from which the Maysles family descended), and later, African Americans. Albert Maysles has described the Boston of the period of his adolescence as "a highly contentious city, full of ethnic conflicts. Then, it was every race, every ethnic group: the Irish, the Italians, the Jews, and so forth" (Trojan 27). During the period when Maysles was growing up, a local radio show (broadcast to 435 stations around the country) hosted by a Catholic priest, Father Charles Coughlin, a supporter of Hitler and Mussolini, regularly engaged in anti-Semitic diatribes. This experience of Boston partly explains Maysles's later attraction to filming human subjects who are outsiders within their own culture.

Taking this basic historical, cultural, and family situation a step further, we may see how a number of Maysles's most important films rework elements of this early period in the lives of both brothers, even though the films themselves do not directly address this history.[3] In many

ways, Maysles's cinema is attracted not only to outsiders but to the idea of family and community as a source of refuge as well as oppression, something that can both nurture and destroy. These are very general themes, of course, and David and Albert Maysles can scarcely lay claim to inventing them. Nevertheless, there is a certain articulation of them in the films that bears attention.

For a start, the Maysles brothers' insistence upon collaboration (while doubtless having some of its genesis in the experience of working with Drew) is of a different nature from most direct-cinema and cinéma-vérité practitioners. At one extreme within these schools of documentary cinema is Wiseman, whose films often feel like one-man operations, their form and final shape strongly controlled by Wiseman himself. At the other extreme is Rouch, the form of whose later films would often be determined by the input of his subjects, who would offer feedback on the editing or, in the case of *Jaguar* (1967), write and speak the voiceover commentary. All of this emerges out of Rouch's notion of anthropological dialogue, ostensibly a refusal to go into a culture and film it in such a manner that the anthropologist—the white, powerful outsider—has the last word.

While Maysles has often spoken of the importance of developing a close relationship with his subjects—one that may, at times, be equivalent to that of a conversational partner—he and his brother did not encourage their subjects to become actively involved with the shooting or editing of the films. In only two instances, *Gimme Shelter* and *The Burk Family of Georgia* (1978), did they ever invite and include within the film itself commentary by their subjects—in the former, the idea was not their own but that of their editor and codirector, Charlotte Zwerin; and in the latter it was imposed on them by the film's producers. In both instances, this Rouch-like structure is used in a hesitant manner, as though the brothers did not completely believe in it or, at least, know what to do with it. It is not through these methods that a collective atmosphere in Maysles brothers' work emerges. Instead, a Maysles film frequently and directly depicts collectives working on projects in which, the films imply, the value of the final result would not have been possible without collaboration, with the collectives serving as analogues to the manner in which the films themselves are produced.

In looking at the list of codirectors credited on Maysles films, one is struck by how often these are women. Almost invariably, their initial input on the films was as film editors. Even though David would reportedly supervise or at least have important input into the editing on the earlier Maysles films, the decision to hand over the footage to editors in the way that the Maysles brothers did works against the standard methods by which direct-cinema and cinéma-vérité filmmakers operated. Mamber stresses the importance of the direct-cinema filmmaker functioning as his or her own editor: "When editing is viewed as an independent function, left to people who did not participate in the filming, a whole new set of priorities and biases, based solely on the footage, can conflict with the commitment not to distort the event itself" (Mamber 3). But Albert Maysles has frequently spoken of the enormous trust he and his brother placed in their editors. He has also stated that he is simply incapable of the sustained attention required for editing (he suffers from attention deficit disorder) and is therefore dependent on others to edit his footage. Hovde has said, "'Al never comes in on structure; he has never, to my knowledge, been in on the structuring of a film'" (qtd. in Rosenthal, *Documentary* 379).

Doubtless a research project could more precisely sort out the authorship on Maysles films. In interviews, the women who worked with Maysles articulate an extremely cogent understanding of these films, more than Maysles himself often does, particularly in relation to *Grey Gardens.* Froemke has stated the case for these women when she declares that Zwerin and Hovde were the "geniuses" and the "foundation" for Maysles (Stubbs 24). Certainly the editing of these films is central to their meaning, and this will be addressed throughout the book. Nevertheless, Zwerin, Hovde, and all the other collaborators on these films have done so (however creatively) within the direct-cinema style and the parameters established by David and Albert Maysles. *Showman* and *What's Happening,* two of the greatest Maysles works, were edited by individuals who did not later become part of the "foundation" for Maysles Films. And as early as *Psychiatry in Russia,* a number of the elements that would later become central to the Maysles approach to filmmaking are evident. The individual voices of these collaborators are difficult to trace and muffled within the larger Maysles mythology. The

Charlotte Zwerin (with Albert and David Maysles) editing *Gimme Shelter*. Photo by Amelie R. Rothschild. Courtesy of Maysles Films, Inc.

documentary work I have seen by Zwerin, Hovde, and Meyer apart from Maysles, while interesting, does not bear a strong relationship to the work they did with Maysles. (It may also have been a deliberate decision on the part of these collaborators to break with the Maysles style once they began working on their own.)

More significant than a precise sorting out of authorship is how the Maysles brothers so often surrounded themselves with female collaborators upon whose input into the final shape of the films they extensively relied. Rather than isolate the individual authorship of these women, I would prefer to draw attention to this fundamental *need* for the input and presence of women, as though the Maysles brothers believed that the films would be incomplete without it. This reliance on women is often manifested in the films themselves. In the families in Maysles films, husbands, fathers, and other male figures are often absent, weak, or dead, while marriages and creative partnerships (Christo and Jeanne-Claude, for example, or Vladimir Horowitz and Wanda Toscanini

Horowitz) are presented in such a way that we are led to believe the husband's creative life would be virtually nonexistent without the presence or collaboration of his wife. If collectives and collaborations are a touchstone for Maysles, they are also unimaginable without this strong female presence, even if this presence is simultaneously subordinated to that of the more dominant male figures. At the end of *Islands* (1986), after the triumphant completion of their latest project, Jeanne-Claude asks Christo, "Is it like you wanted? Did we do a good job for you?"

Finally, the importance given to families (extended or otherwise) and to enclave-like communities in Maysles relates to the question of work. Labor is vital to much of the first fifty years of documentary cinema (if not to the history of cinema itself during this period), in the midst of major political and economic upheavals and two world wars: work as something desirable and necessary, dignified labor tied to the soil and to community (as in Robert Flaherty); work as an extension of a culturally and politically unified nation state, and even as a form of collective ecstasy (as in Dziga Vertov). Rather than fulfilling the utopian fantasies of the prewar period and allowing for greater freedom and flexibility in work, the developments in industrialization after the war frustrated and limited economic satisfaction for the worker who, most often laboring within politically conservative or repressive regimes, felt trapped. "I think the tragedy of our times is that hardly anyone chooses his job," says one of the subjects of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). "You don't select—you fall into it."

Within the school of direct cinema, Wiseman has treated the subject of work the most extensively, situating it within corporations and institutions in which workers find themselves absorbed into a structure where resistance is presented as a virtual impossibility. In his great film *The Store* (1983), Wiseman films the employees of a Neiman-Marcus department store in Dallas. While none of them protest or seem markedly unhappy in their jobs, Wiseman repeatedly employs rhetorical cuts to mannequins or to the objects, at once luxurious and lifeless, being sold; or he films employees and customers from high-angled shots; or draws attention to the rigorous process of the training and presentation of the workers. The cumulative effect is to place the workers within an atmosphere of mechanization, immobility, and control, epitomized by the sequence in which the workers file out of an exit door while having

their bags examined by a security guard. Wiseman's methods are the obverse of Maysles's. Wiseman's camera, x-ray like, concerns itself with uncovering the surface of the worlds being depicted, hence the emphasis on grotesquerie, caricature, ugliness, and on movements predicated on their relationship to stillness, embalming, or death: the mannequins in *The Store* or the statuary in *La Comédie- Française* (1996). While mindful of the dehumanizing aspects of work in contemporary American culture, Maysles never goes to the extremes of Wiseman. Instead, however dehumanizing work may become (particularly in a film such as *Salesman*), it is usually bound up with notions of the performative, the aesthetic, and the transformative power of the individual who finds fulfillment working within a larger collective.

III

Central to the ways that Albert and David Maysles understood their own position as filmmakers is that, rather than making their social or political views explicit, the film is shot and structured in such a way that the viewer is given a choice in their interpretation. This concept of the viewer completing the film in an "open" manner is the antithesis of the political documentary cinema of Vertov or Emile de Antonio, for whom the forces of montage are used in the service of a more or less clear political thesis. Even in comparison with the American liberal tradition of Barbara Kopple (who originally worked for the Maysles brothers and often cites them as primary sources of inspiration), Maysles films are less overtly political. Kopple's most representative films, such as *Harlan County USA* (1976) and *American Dream* (1991), have clearer political aims than virtually anything in Maysles. The Maysles approach more or less follows Drew's insistence on the film not putting forward a clear or didactic political viewpoint. Instead, the film is intended to raise questions more than it is meant to supply answers. Mamber supports this thesis when he writes that "Maysles films do not attempt to 'hide' a message in a surface of uninterpreted observation; they simply refuse to spoon-feed interpretation when the material itself is open to consideration from a number of points of view. . . . [N]one of the thinking is done for you in the form of narration or an easily followed plot" (Mamber 147).

Be that as it may, it is true that several Maysles films have engendered highly contradictory and even violent responses, suggesting that

these films (especially *Salesman, Gimme Shelter,* and *Grey Gardens*) are relatively "open" texts. While their meaning is not infinite, the diverse range of responses highlights the need for careful attention to the formal structure of the films and to the nature of their reception over the years, especially as the reception of some of them has shifted over time. Maysles films, like virtually all films that emerge out of the direct-cinema tradition, partake of what one may loosely term a liberal humanist viewpoint: a belief in the ultimate solidarity of cultures, races, and classes; an investment in the notion of spontaneity and freedom; and a skepticism toward the value of overly organized and systematic belief systems, including those of politics, labor, and organized religion. But unlike the films of Wiseman (another Boston native), Maysles films rarely examine the social and institutional underpinnings of the worlds they depict. The closest Maysles has come to doing this is *Concert of Wills: The Making of the Getty Center* (1997, in collaboration with Susan Froemke and Bob Eisenhardt), an atypical film in its form (with its heavy reliance on the talking-heads interview) and subject matter (its focus on the clash of egos within an institutional framework). More typically, Maysles's liberal humanism focuses on behavior, gesture, spoken language, personality, and interactions among people.

Abortion: Desperate Choices (1992, in collaboration with Froemke and Dickson) almost entirely concerns itself with the personalities of its primarily female subjects inside and outside of an abortion clinic in Pittsburgh: the agony of the women who decide to undergo abortions, and the anti-abortion protestors outside the clinic attempting to dissuade them from going inside. But the film pays very little attention to the specifics (including the economic) of running the clinic itself. Everything is focused on the emotional turmoil engendered by the decision to have an abortion, while the fathers, boyfriends, or husbands are often absent from the film or presented as weak figures. The film is fairly balanced in its view, turning neither the pro- nor anti-abortion subjects into objects of ridicule, although its emotional weight is arguably aligned with those who believe in women having access to legal abortion.

This position is especially clear given the emphasis on a series of harrowing interviews that interrupt the film's presentation of the day-to-day activities at the clinic: footage shot in black and white of women from the 1920s up through the 1960s who had abortions under illegal