

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH ALBERT MAYSLES

Albert Maysles has been at the forefront of documentary filmmaking for more than 40 years. Collaborating with his brother David until David's death in 1987, Maysles directed and photographed such films as *Salesman* (1968), *Gimme Shelter* (1970), and *Grey Gardens* (1975). This discussion followed a screening of *Salesman*, an intimate, touching, and comic portrait of Bible salesmen, and one of the first documentary features to be released theatrically. The screening, part of the Museum's New York Film Critics Circle's series "Critics Choice: Great Documentaries," was moderated by *New York Times* film critic Matt Zoller Seitz.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Salesman*, moderated by Matt Zoller Seitz and introduced by chief curator David Schwartz (January 20, 2007):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Al Maysles and welcome back Matt Seitz. (Applause)

MAYSLES: Nice to see so many people. I'm sure Paul Brennan [subject of the documentary *Salesman*] would enjoy being here. He passed away some years ago, though.

SEITZ: First, I wondered if you could just talk about the origins of this movie. And how long did it take to shoot? How much contact did you have with these guys before you started rolling and so forth?

MAYSLES: 1967, I guess it was, my brother and I made a film for PBS, a film of Truman Capote, at a time when he was about to publish his book *In Cold Blood* [*A Visit with Truman Capote* (1966)]. In fact, that film, along with a film of Muhammad Ali [*Muhammad and Larry* (1980)] and a film of Marlon Brando [*Meet Marlon Brando* (1966)]—they're all coming out in a couple of months on [The] Criterion [Collection label]. But I mention the Capote book because he claimed it to be a nonfiction novel. And at that time, there wasn't a nonfiction feature film. And we wanted to be the first. And *Salesman* (1968) was the first. My brother had lunch one day with Truman's editor, Joe Fox, at Random House, and asked Joe Fox what would be a suitable subject that would meet with some success as a documentary feature. And he said, "What about door-to-door salesmen?" And both my brother and

I had done some of that stuff ourselves. I sold Fuller brushes in high school; and when I got out of college, for as long as I could stand it—which was two or three weeks—I sold Encyclopedia Americana. And my brother sold Avon products. (Laughter) So we knew that there was a great potential in telling something about America. And we sent out somebody to research the kinds of stuff that was being sold door-to-door. And in that research, which took several months, the researcher found that there was a company in Chicago actually selling the Bible, but as an item with a beautiful leather binding and lots of color photographs.

And somehow: The salesman—who represents the guy who was a rugged individualist, because when he knocks on that door it's all up to him as to whether he's going to succeed or fail; and the Bible—being so much an item in our culture, but interestingly enough, sold as a product, right; and then of course, the woman who's going to be the additional subject of the film—the housewife. So you had all the makings of something that would tell us a lot about America. And in fact, when the film came out, Norman Mailer said something to the effect that it's one of the few films that tells so much about America. Now, the other questions...

SEITZ: Oh actually, just to follow up on that, could you talk a little bit about the distinction between journalism and a nonfiction novel; and between a documentary and a nonfiction feature? Because that's something that I touched on in my opening remarks, and I was sort of just shooting in the dark. I didn't know if I was right about that or not, but...

MAYSLES: Well, actually, the distinction between what my brother and I had been doing all these years, and what I continue to do—there's a distinction between what we do, and what documentary filmmakers normally do, and what journalists do. And that is we get very, very, very close to what's actually going on. There's no narration. There's no host. There's no music that is added to it to give it some sort of a punch. That moment, at the beginning of *Salesman*, when that little girl goes over to the piano and knocks out that tune? Beethoven couldn't have done any better. And one of my pet peeves is that television is practically devoid of anything very profound. They don't; the journalism is somebody telling you what happened, and to the neglect of giving the viewer the opportunity of actually being there. When you saw this film just now, you must have felt what Paul was going through. You really, for that time, that hour and a half, you were almost... almost Paul himself. And you felt—every one of those scenes, you felt that you were present for what was going on.

Journalism, I think, should do that, but doesn't. And most documentaries are something else. Most documentaries—also, this is another peeve of mine—they come about because somebody is trying to represent his or her own opinion. *Salesman*, from my point of view, is that much greater because there's no point of view behind it. It simply puts you there. And that notion of "not point of view" came to me so forcefully when somebody gave a lecture on Shakespeare and ended his talk by saying, "The great thing about Shakespeare was: he didn't have a point of view." Very few documentaries are made that way, but they are all the more likely to achieve a greatness by discarding point of view, discarding the Michael Moore sort of approach, and coming up with an approach where you accept people as they are. And you're determined to be that much more authentic; that much more truthful; that much more able to put in the hands of the viewer material from which they may want to make a judgment, but material which is not a pre-judgment for them.

SEITZ: But there's a distinction, though, to be made, isn't there, between approaching a subject with a preconceived notion or trying to fit things into a little slot as you're editing it, and trying to go beyond simply recording? Because I think there are several

sections in this movie where you and your collaborators did try to go beyond simply standing there and observing what's happening. The example that jumped out at me right away is when Paul is on the train, and the sales meeting in Chicago: You cut between the guys standing up and talking about how much money they're going to make, and Paul looking out that window, obviously worried about the meeting—which we see *him* at. It's like he's worrying about the meeting that he is about to be at. And this is suggesting an interior emotional state through editing. So this is not—you know? Can you kind of parse the distinction there?

MAYSLES: Right. I'm glad you pointed that out, because it was a kind of departure from our normal way of doing things. So I guess people are entitled to break their own rules. (Laughter)

SEITZ: Well, how do you decide when to break those rules? You know, the reason they jumped out at me is because, for the most part, you do have an almost monk-like attitude about how you observe these people, and how you record these people. But there's another example where Paul is driving—I believe it's in the Boston section—there are a couple of scenes where he's driving, where you hear music playing on the radio, and you jump forward in time. And there's actually one cut—I think it's the second time—where you go from day to night, and the song is playing continuously.

MAYSLES: This guy is dangerous! (Laughter)

SEITZ: I'm just curious!

MAYSLES: Again, another departure. Right, right; but there's one more time, too! (Laughter)

SEITZ: There's one more. Let me think. Are you talking about both the times when Paul is driving? Or is there another time?

MAYSLES: When he's driving, yes. He's driving in Florida and he's talking...

SEITZ: Yes, yes; *This Land is Your Land*—that one?

MAYSLES: Yes, but he's talking about the other guys. And he was put up to that. But don't tell anybody! (Laughter)

SEITZ: When you saw Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), and you saw how he—

MAYSLES: I didn't see it.

SEITZ: You didn't see it?

MAYSLES: No, no. I should...

SEITZ: He introduced—this has become a cliché now—but when they introduce the characters, they have the name of the guy and their nickname on the screen [next to their image]. Had this been done before *Salesman*?

MAYSLES: Oh...! [*Salesman* was released] before his film, yes.

SEITZ: No, but I mean had that been done prior to *Salesman*, that [technique of] identifying the people next to a close-up?

MAYSLES: Oh, I don't know, you know.

SEITZ: This movie contributed so many clichés—that you didn't even know were clichés, because you invented them!

MAYSLES: Fair enough! (Laughs, Laughter)

SEITZ: Can you talk about the technology that made this sort of filming possible? And how did it differ from the way documentaries were made before the late fifties and early sixties?

MAYSLES: In 1955, I was twenty-eight years old. I had been working at a mental hospital, headed up a research project at Massachusetts General Hospital, but had already put in three years of teaching at Boston University, and decided—true to my nature of being an adventurer—that I would go to Russia, the Soviet Union. So I thought, "Well, if I could get in—I certainly can get a tourist visa, that shouldn't be difficult. But I'd like to get into mental hospitals and make a film." And I did. [*Psychiatry in Russia* (1955)] But before leaving, I thought, "Well, okay, what an opportunity—I've got to do this thing; I've got to get into those mental hospitals. But if I'm lucky enough to get in..."

I'm not a writer. I was pretty good with a still camera. I went to *Life* magazine and I said, "Look,

I'm going to get into mental hospitals. I'm a psychologist." They believed me. But they weren't giving any advance money. They said when I came back, they'd like to look at the photographs. Then as I was walking through the city, I noticed the sign, "CBS." "Edward R. Murrow works there," I thought. So I went in and I asked to see Mr. Murrow. And he was on vacation, so they referred me to the head of the news department... Anyway, I ended up with a very simple wind-up camera, with a roll of film that lasts only three minutes. So I was really handicapped, technically.

SEITZ: 16mm?

MAYSLES: 16mm, so it was good enough for television. And off I went. And I crashed a party two days after I arrived, met the top Soviet leaders. And one of them—who was probably more curious about me than I about him, because very few Americans were in Russia at that time—he came back to me with a phone number, and said, "Call some one; you're all set." So that was my first film. But it was made with this very primitive kind of camera. Enough so that you saw visually what was going on. And that was very important for me, to be able to depict ordinary Russians. I thought that we needed to do that in order—well, in order to prevent a war.

And it would be so hard for me to think that we would have gone into Iraq if we had visual impressions, documentary films, behind-the-scenes of actual family life. That's what we need. We don't have enough of that in America. We've got all these reality shows but, my God, is that real family? I hope not, I hope not! (Laughs) Wouldn't it be nice just to sit in on, with a camera, and film a family that represents something that we can envy? You know, where people are really successful as human beings. There's very little humanity in our television. The perfect example of non-humanity is the television commercial. For some reason or other, they don't want any humanity in that. "Let's keep that out. Let's keep the automobile running around mountainsides, through mud and slush." (Laughs)

SEITZ: Well, they're trying to sell stuff. That would be antithetical to making you want to buy things, right?

MAYSLES: I think they're wrong about that.

SEITZ: Yes?

MAYSLES: Again, going back to my experience in Russia in 1955. When I arrived there, I knew that most Americans would have thought, “Well okay, this guy—he’s a very idealistic guy. Good luck to him, but he’s not going to be able to meet ordinary people.” And so I met another American who had been in Moscow several days before me, and we talked about what kind of access I might have in meeting people and he said, “Well, you know, I had a date last night.” I said, “Oh, yeah?” He said, “Yeah; I went to the flower shop, I bought myself a bouquet of flowers.” And he said, “As you may know, the escalator goes way down into the subway, maybe 300 feet below the street level. And as I was going down the escalator, this very attractive woman was coming toward me, and I threw her the bouquet of flowers. (Laughter) And she grabbed them, and we both went our ways.” Perfect commercial for 1-800-Flowers. (Laughter) The word of mouth would be fantastic. People would smile with glee, and rush out to the flower shop to get the bouquet of flowers.

SEITZ: The intimacy that you were able to capture in this movie and other films that you’ve done, that was only possible because of the type of equipment that you not only were using, but you had a hand in creating, right? You, and Robert Drew, and your brother [David Maysles], and Ricky Leacock, and [D. A.] Pennebaker, and all those guys, right?

MAYSLES: Yes. That’s right; yes. But even more important than that, my wife is a family therapist, and I read an essay that she wrote on relationships between therapist and patient. And she said two things should take place. One is, the therapist should have “the gaze”. And so when I meet somebody, I learned that from the way I look at that person, they gain trust right away. And there’s that trust, which is continued, as she put it, by empathizing with that person. So I really like people, and they pick up on that. And so I’m able to establish a rapport with them that’s so important. People sometimes have described what I do as “fly-on-the-wall”. Nothing could be more incorrect than that. A camera on the wall picks up nothing, because there’s no intelligence or sensibility behind it. And you need that kind of rapport for the camera

and you to be right there and mobile, to move around and to get exactly close to what’s going on.

SEITZ: Over time, are there any lessons that you’ve learned that teach you where to be with your camera? Whether you’re on a person who’s speaking or the person who’s listening? Or is it just a gut feeling?

MAYSLES: I think I had that right from the start. But I’ve moved to Harlem now, and I have my studio up there. And we have a 75-seat movie theater that we’re developing, so that people in that community can see good films of value and interest to them. But also, we’re starting a program where we’re teaching the local kids how to use video cameras. And I just discovered that there’s a high-definition camera that Canon has just come out with; it’s only \$1,000 and you can hold it in the palm of your hand. It’s going to revolutionize opportunities for us to know one another.

SEITZ: You’ve been very much on the forefront on this—well, of technological change in movie making for forty, going on fifty years now.

MAYSLES: Right.

SEITZ: And I remember about, I guess it was maybe four or five years ago, I came to interview you for an article for *The Star-Ledger* in your offices in Manhattan. And the first thing you did was you handed me this photocopied manifesto on—I don’t remember what the title of it was, but it was a manifesto for, I guess, documentary filmmaking in the new—in video, in the era of video.

MAYSLES: Oh, yes. “Thirty Points,” I think, right? Thirty reasons why I switched from film to video.

SEITZ: That’s what it was, yes. You were just evangelical about that, and that really blew my mind. And there was also a poster on the wall: “Kodak Celebrates.” It was the 100th-anniversary of the creation of motion pictures, and they had little thumbnail sketches of 100 great cinematographers, and one of them was you. And I think they asked the cinematographers to take their own photos. You said, “Come over here. I want to show you something.” You were so excited, and you said, “Look at mine. Tell me what you notice.” And I said, “I don’t know.” It was really tiny. And you said, “It’s

the only one on the poster that's out of focus." (Laughter) You were so excited. And you talked about how—you said, "Picture isn't everything," and that "Filmmakers and cinematographers don't like that to get out, but it's true." Can you talk about that in film and video, and that whole idea?

MAYSLES: Yes. One of the most brilliant documentary filmmakers is Jonas Mekas. And his stuff—he can't hold the camera steady. He's out of focus most of the time. (Laughter) But, my God, what poetry! What a touch with life! What a connection you make with what's going on! Of course, ideally, you like to have somebody with the professional capabilities of holding the camera steady, and composing the shot, all that stuff. But without the psychology that goes along with the poetry... Well, Orson Welles put it very well when he said that the eye of the cameraman must be—the eye behind the lens—eye of a poet. And [Robert] Capa, the great still photographer, when asked to give advice to a new photographer, he said, "Get close. Get close." And I think those are two elements that are so very important, that are often time neglected.

SEITZ: So obviously, you want the skill with the equipment and the sensibility to be on the same level. But if they're not, it's better to have the sensibility?

MAYSLES: Yes. You know, these two words: "professional" and "amateur". What does "amateur" mean? For the love of it, for the love of it. If you don't have that, from my point of view, forget it.

SEITZ: What do you think about YouTube and—have you gone on YouTube to...?

MAYSLES: Well, yes. I got a little bit angry, because they've been showing my stuff without paying for it. (Laughter) But I guess it sells more of my DVDs, so it's okay. (Laughter)

SEITZ: What are you working on next?

MAYSLES: Good question. There are four or five projects that are in the works that I can think of. There are probably another four or five that don't come to mind immediately. But the big project that I've been wanting to do for a long time—and if

there's anybody here with the money for it, please come forth after this (Laughter)—It's about trains. But more importantly, it's about people I meet on trains.

I had this experience, well, maybe twenty years ago when I had this idea for the train film (which I'm calling *In Transit*). I had this idea of finding somebody on a long distance train, in this case, going across this country, and finding somebody where there's a story about to take place when they get off the train. I would film that story, and the film would be half a dozen such stories, shot in different parts of the world.

Well, the first experience that I had in actually filming somebody on the train for this film: the train was leaving the Pittsburgh station on its way east, as I was going across the country. And as I walked through the train, I saw this woman, joined by her child. And she looked kind of nervous; something was going on. So I asked her if I could join her. And at that time, I had this big camera on my shoulder, and a sound person with me, with a microphone in his hand. I said, "If it's okay, would you mind? I'm making a movie of people." And she said, "Oh, that's okay." And I started filming. Right away, she told me why she was on the train: When she was three years old, her parents broke up in an ugly divorce, and her father got custody of her, vowing that her mother would never see her again. She's on the train because the night before, she had gotten a call from a woman in Philadelphia saying, "I'm your mother. Get on the next train." So when she got off the train, I'm still filming, and she looks around and nobody's there. As she's going up the stairs, there's a woman at the top of the stairs who opens her arms; rushes down; they embrace... and I filmed the whole encounter. Well, that's just one of half a dozen stories that will make up that film.

I'll tell you of another film that I'm making, too. As we all know, there's been such a growth of anti-Semitism and it's not only Mel Gibson's film! There's a film that the Hezbollah has made. *The New York Times* talks about the Hezbollah, but [there's] one thing they don't point out: having pointed out how they're against Zionism and Israel, *The New York Times* doesn't point out that the Hezbollah's also anti-Semitic; viciously so. And they've made a film, and in the film, which is transmitted on satellite television so anybody can

see it, there's a scene where they have put forth an enactment of a Jewish-looking guy killing a child, taking the blood to mix it with matzos to celebrate Passover. Totally without any basis in fact, and yet, this piece of mythology has been going on now for 800 years.

Martin Luther—"Mr. Nice Guy" who formed the Protestant movement, and maybe did a lot of good stuff along that way—became, as he got older, more and more anti-Semitic, because he couldn't convert enough Jews to Christianity. And so he fell for this myth, and saw to it that two Jews were executed on these false charges. And it's been going on—there are probably 300 or 400 Jews over the period of the last 800 years who have been executed on this kind of frame-up.

Well, one of the most famous cases—famous at it's time: In 1913, a man by the name of Mendel Beilis, was brought to trial in Kiev, in the Ukraine, on these false charges. And everything was a hoax. The Czar at that time was extremely anti-Semitic, and the police were framed.... all this stuff. So that everything looked as though he was going to be found guilty. The last moment, one of the members of the jury stands up and says, "I can't find this man guilty. He's totally innocent." And he holds up a Christian icon, and he convinces five others in the jury that the guy's innocent—and so his life is saved.

Well, that's only part of the story, but I've done a lot of research. I have the transcript of the trial. I'll have to do some things that are a little bit unorthodox for myself, because I'm going back into history, but I was able to find a woman, ninety-five years old, in the Bronx, who is Mendel Beilis's daughter. And I was able to find two women, one in her late eighties and one in her late nineties, sisters, whose uncle was one of Mendel Beilis's defense attorneys, and I've been filming them. So that's another project.

The Scorsese project is simply filming the [Rolling Stones in] concert. And he had seventeen 35mm cameras there, and invited me to come along with a little handheld video camera, and to shoot whatever I saw fitting. It's a different sort of a film; because it's a film of the Rolling Stones, he's going to go through many, many hours of film material from my own film, *Gimme Shelter*; material that

didn't go into that film, but some of which might go into his own.

You know, when we made the film of The Beatles [*What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A.* (1964)], I don't know that we could have done any better, even with the equipment that we have now, because we were so determined to do it just right, and so determined—even though we had this big camera and it ran only ten minutes of film before you had to change magazines and all that, you know—that somehow we managed to get it. And it's the same thing with *Salesman*. I don't know, with video equipment, whether we could have gotten any more that would have told the story any better. We were so... If we had to shoot it in 35mm, I think we still would have gotten it somehow or other.

But just recently, I sat in on a conversation that three three-and-a-half year old kids were having at breakfast time. And I sat there with my little video camera. I didn't have to use a light. The little cassette in the camera ran for a whole hour, so I didn't have to stop to reload at any time. I didn't miss a thing. And it's just a beautiful seven-minute piece. And I intend to sit in on other little partnerships of kids that age. You know, a three-year-old, a four-year-old, a five-year-old kid; a precocious kid, with a friend who's also precocious. Any of you who've had kids, you know the kind of stuff that comes out of the mouths of these babes. (Laughs) And I hope to make a whole film of these little partnerships.

What got me thinking that there'd be some wonderful stuff that way was not only my experience in filming the three-and-a-half-year-old kids at breakfast, but before that, I met a woman who told me about a friend of hers who has two kids—one of them only two-and-a-half, and the other one even younger, only two months old. And she overheard the two-and-a-half year old child talking to the two month old child, saying, "What's it like in heaven? I think I forgot." (Laughter) Well, if you get that kind of stuff—and I think we can get that, and maybe even better—we'll have a wonderful film. The only problem is, no matter how good that film, if I brought it to CNN, ABC, CBS, any one of those outfits, it wouldn't get shown.

SEITZ: Actually, if you could cut in footage of Anderson Cooper shedding a tear as he listens, I think it would. (Laughter)

MAYSLES: We opened... from the beginning, the film might be equally of all four of them. It might be of Charlie, the Gipper... It as only once we got much into the filming, that we could see that it was really Paul where most of the story was. Interestingly, when we finished the film, we couldn't get it shown in movie theaters, although that was what we wanted to do. So we rented a movie theater. And in that process, we had screenings raising money for the rental. And as people filed out one day from the screening, there was one person left in the theater. And she got up—I could see that she had been crying because of Paul. And as she got closer, I saw how attractive she was. And I elbowed my brother. I said, "She's for me." That's how I met my wife. (Laughter)

SEITZ: Last one, I'm told.

MAYSLES: (Responds to audience question) The question is, "How did I introduce myself to these people—who were, of course, total strangers—at the door?" Right. Either Paul or my brother and I would, in a very few words, say that we're making a film of this gentleman and of his fellow workers, as they enter people's homes, and we'd like to continue, if that's okay. And 90% of the time, people said, "Okay." So we really didn't have a problem. (Laughs) Well, actually, that 10% usually was made up of people, women, who still had their hair in curlers or something, you know. (Laughter) But as you remember, there was a woman with her hair in curlers, too. By the way, many of you know

that *Grey Gardens* has been made also into a musical. And *Salesman* is being made into a play. Not a musical, but a play.

Well, I wouldn't want to make the musical myself. (Laughter) I don't have anything like that kind of talent, so... But the people who made the musical not only have the talent, but they also invited me into the making process. And they invited me to criticize, and I did make a few criticisms. One criticism that I found important to make was that in the earliest versions, they had Mrs. Beale responsible for everything that went wrong in that relationship. And I thought that was not fair. And so they've corrected that, and I think they've done a very good job. There was a young woman who came to me with a film that she made for her project as a student at Brown University, a film about *Grey Gardens*. And I thought it was terrible, because again, she had made the mistake of portraying Mrs. Beale so unfairly. And so she went back, and not only did she change that, but she went to *Grey Gardens* itself and filmed the people who are now living there. And she made a beautiful little film. It's called *Ghosts of Grey Gardens*. And now there's another film that we have made of *Grey Gardens*; it's called *The Beales of Grey Gardens*, and that was made from material in the original shooting which didn't get into the film, but was so good that we decided to make another film. And that one is also being distributed by Criterion.

SEITZ: Alright. Well, thanks folks; and thank you, Mr. Maysles. (Applause)

MAYSLES: Thank you very much. Obviously, you've got a nice thing going here! Thank you. (Laughter)

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