

Straight Shooters: the films of Albert & David Maysles

In September 2003, ACMI presents Moments of Truth a retrospective program of the Maysles' exquisite works of film portraiture that occupy a pivotal place in the history of documentary cinema.

In the early 1960s, brothers Albert and David Maysles, two filmmakers based in Boston, USA, pioneered a revolutionary approach to non-fiction filmmaking that came to redefine the documentary for audiences and filmmakers alike. This movement, coined Direct Cinema for its intimate and spontaneous engagement with the documentary subject, used the developments in portable cameras and sound recording technology to capture the energy, dynamism and immediacy of everyday life on film. Liberated from the constraints of scripts, commentary and sets, the Maysles forged a new cinematic language by drawing on the fictional devices of narrative cinema to create compelling and dramatic meditations on life and the human condition.

The Maysles' body of work is dominated by character-driven documentaries that capture both the extraordinary qualities of everyday individuals and the ordinariness of those in the limelight. Their ability to capture the secret lives and raw emotions of their subjects cannot simply be attributed to the trust garnered between the Maysles and their subjects. Key images – the inhalation of a cigarette, a sip of liquor from a highball whiskey glass, a surreptitious whisper or an inviting glance – provide an intimate insight into the documentary subject and give the films a greater degree of personal and cultural meaning.

Unlike the non-fiction films of their predecessors, which privileged the political over the personal to inform the viewer, the Maysles' films draw on the personal experiences of their subjects to represent broader sociological and political issues of the time. Their intimate portrait of four itinerant bible sellers in their acclaimed documentary feature, *Salesman*

(1968), reveals as much about American cultural pre-occupations of the 1960s and the commodification of religion, as it does about one man's failure to live the American dream.

In the opening sequence of *Salesman*, Paul Brennan hustles an expensive leather-bound bible to a poor Catholic mother while the Maysles' camera observes every gesture and subtlety of their exchange. The film cuts between observations of Brennan, nervously tracing the ornate leather cover with his finger, to the woman shifting uncomfortably in her armchair to reveal the quiet desperation of his sales pitch. Apologetically the mother declines his offer, as the camera crosses to her young daughter bashing out a simple but sombre tune on the piano. As the melody fills the soundtrack, the camera returns to Brennan slowly shaking his head, not so much in disapproval, but in the resigned acknowledgment of his own failings. His trembling voice, furrowed brow and weary sigh are magnified by the Maysles unflinching camera, forming a poignant insight into the salesman's fall from grace.

At the time of *Salesman's* release, film critic Pauline Kael thought Brennan's 'performance' was so convincing that she accused the Maysles of deceiving viewers through the use of a professional actor to portray a documentary subject. For many critics like Kael, the use of cinematic devices of fictional film to heighten the dramatic tension of a documentary resulted in a distortion of 'truth' and the deception of the documentary viewer. Acutely aware of the complex relationship between reality and their art, Albert Maysles remains convinced that ethics and aesthetics can co-exist:



Reality is my caretaker, the provider of subjects, themes and experiences – all of which are endowed with the power of truth and the romance of discovery... The closer I adhere to reality, the more honest and authentic my tales become.

For the Maysles, these 'tales' are shaped by a dramatic logic that engages the viewer visually and emotionally without ever sacrificing the essence of the original material. Given that the unobtrusive shooting approach of Direct Cinema lends itself to authentic representation, the Maysles consider the organisation of images and sounds in the editing process as a creative treatment of reality that can potentially reveal 'artistic truths'.

For contemporary audiences, the Maysles are particularly well known for their candid and revealing portraits of famous artists and sports personalities. While their subjects are never stripped bare of the chutzpah, make-up and lights, the intimate portrayals of these celebrities at work – Truman Capote at a book signing for *In Cold Blood* (*With Love From Truman*, 1966), Mick Jagger on the Rolling Stones 1969 US tour (*Gimme Shelter*, 1970), Muhammad Ali in the match to retain his title (*Muhammad and Larry*, 1980) – provide a critical commentary on the tensions between artifice and authenticity in the documentary

form. In *With Love From Truman*, author Truman Capote describes his acclaimed novel *In Cold Blood* as a literary experiment to 'produce a work of art out of factual material that has the same impact that the most imaginative literature does'. With these words, Capote could well be describing the Maysles' groundbreaking approach to the documentary form: to create a site where truth and art collide, compete and interchange.

Natasha Gadd > ACMI Cinema Programs

Moments of Truth screens at ACMI from Thursday 11 to Saturday 20 September 2003 see page 14 for details