

---

Fabrizio CILENTO\*

## THE ONTOLOGY OF REPLAY: THE ZAPRUDER VIDEO AND AMERICAN CONSPIRACY FILMS

**Abstract.** *The Zapruder video is a visual sampling of a traumatic event that needs to be repeated, retold, and reframed in an endless hermeneutic process. The raw document revealed to US filmmakers that the replay offers the possibility of a different cinematic time, and thus a different way of re-constructing actual events. Several conspiracy films of the 1970s organize their narrative through the replay, rather than the more traditional figure of the flashback. This study explores how the communicational experience of Kennedy's assassination created an epistemological break, an unprecedented interrogation about the ability of the image to reveal the deep nature of events.*

**Key words:** *John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Albert and David Maysles, Gimme Shelter, Alan J. Pakula, the Zapruder Video, The Parallax View, direct cinema*

813

*"Did you ever wake up to find / A day that broke up your mind / Destroyed your notion of circular time" (Rolling Stones, "Sway" in Sticky Fingers; 971).*

### Back and Forward

In the United States, the collective communicational experience of John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963 created an epistemological break, an unprecedented interrogation about the ability of the image to reveal the deep nature of events. Following that historical turning point, the questioning of the ability to know the truth was intensified by criticism surrounding the conclusions of the Warren Commission. The footage of JFK's assassination is traumatic because it is highly visual in its happening, but in such a way that the raw document implicitly invokes the need for an exploration of the concealed driving forces, as a result becoming a crucial factor in the advent of social documentaries and conspiracy film in the United States.

---

\* Fabrizio Cilento, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Film and Digital Media, Department of Communication, Messiah College.

The incorporation of the replay appears to be one of the most innovative trademarks of American filmmaking in the early 1970s. The replay - to play again something that has been recorded on tape, video or film - typically belongs to the realm of television language, particularly to live sports broadcasts. This is probably why to date, almost no coherent theories can be found on the ontology and the metaphysics of the use of replay in cinema.

What is the linguistic meaning of a sequence that returns once or multiple times in the same film? And, how does the impact on the film's content and reception vary if the repeated sequence directly represents or alludes to actual political murders and conspiracies?

In dealing with a set of repeated images that play against each other, the American films I analyze insistently employ replay as an iconoclastic act of frustration against the alleged revelatory power of the cinematic image. Indeed, the insistence on returning to the exact same images/sequences while changing the context around them via a sophisticated editing implies the desire to furnish contrasting perspectives and points of view on controversial historical events of the recent past. As fragments of information are pulled together, the films produce a cohesive narrative through an obsessive interrogation of the versions of the facts promoted by institutions and media, particularly by television reports. The oxymoronic question posed by these films is whether it is possible to recover a complete understanding of the events while contemplating the impossibility of doing so in a fragmented culture and industry that is switching toward postmodernism.

### Forward and Back

Based on Mark Lane's novel *Rush to Judgment* and distributed by National General, *Executive Action* (David Miller, 1973) was the first film to challenge the Warren Commission report. The initial titles signal that what follows is a non-rigorous conspiracy film: "Although much of this film is fiction, much of it is also based on documented historical facts. Did the conspiracy we describe actually exist? We do not know. We merely suggest it could have existed." Miller's work incorporates black and white footage of Kennedy's television speeches (the president appears to be on the brink of signing a test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union, invoking antitrust law to stop corporate mergers, and pulling out US troops from Vietnam) and color reenactments of his assassination.

*Executive Action* is undermined by its uncritical subscription to the Camelot mythology and ironically, by a rush to judgment. Director Miller and screenwriter Donald Trumbo start from the assumption that a high level conspiracy followed up by a cover-up of remarkable dimensions did take place, but they do not support their theory with credible evidence. What we see in

several fictional sequences may or may not have happened. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that even the archival television imagery employed was manipulated by montage, and at times Kennedy's voice was dubbed in order to emphasize the value of his progressive politics (Simon, 1996: 177–78).

Despite the manipulation of the original sources and an overinvestment in attempting to solve the mystery of the Dallas assassination, one sequence in particular provides a departure point for engaging in the cultural considerations on the impact of JFK's death on American filmmaking. A few minutes after the beginning of the film, James Farrington (Burt Lancaster), an ex-CIA operative who organizes clandestine activities, reminds a secret cabal of right-wing Texan conspirators plotting Kennedy's murder that, since the early days of American democracy, presidential assassination is a consistent pattern in national politics.

*Abraham Lincoln, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1865. Target: sitting and stationary. Range: six inches. Successful. James Garfield, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1881. Target: walking at two-and-a-half miles per hour. Range: three feet. Successful. William McKinley, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1901. Target: standing and stationary. Range: one foot. Successful. Theodore Roosevelt, October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1912. Target: standing and stationary. Range: six feet. Wounded, survived. Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1933. Target: sitting and stationary. Range: 23 feet. Five shots, five misses.*

The information is presented by a slideshow, which includes photos and artists' drawings representing these assassination scenes. Farrington explains that each time, the official investigation concluded that the killer was a solitary madman, implying that the same could certainly happen again in Kennedy's case. A variation in this historical dynamic is that none of the murders or attempted murders belonging to Farrington's 'catalogue' were documented by raw video footage, like that of Kennedy's. There is a difference between a president who is shot "only once" in history such as Lincoln, and a president whose head keeps exploding in front of our eyes every time we replay, often in slow motion, the 22 seconds of amateur footage in the Zapruder video.

When the father of Hollywood cinema David W. Griffith reconstructed the assassination of Lincoln in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), he was dealing with an event that will never return in front of our eyes, at least not in the exact same form. Despite its documentary realism, the meta-textual nature of Lincoln's assassination sequence makes clear that, for the director, the president's death is a spectacle within the spectacle.<sup>1</sup> In Griffith's reenactment,

<sup>1</sup> *Lincoln was killed by the well-known actor John Wilkes Booth while attending a performance of the play Our American Cousin at Ford's Theatre, Washington D. C.*

Lincoln is a shadow, an animated illustration coming out of the pages of a dusty history book, and thus dead in advance. In the sepia images of *Birth of a Nation*, even one of the most dramatic episodes of the early years of American democracy assumes an aura of nostalgia. This feeling goes along with the movie's regressive lament for the loss of the Plantation Illusion, the belief in a golden age in which the pre-Civil War South provided the good life for wealthy aristocratic owners and loyal slaves. The Zapruder video creates a different dynamic. Throughout the years, government commissions, press, television, lone investigators and conspiracy theorists have scrutinized the footage in every possible way in a search for the truth surrounding the event.<sup>2</sup> Due to the non-fictional image's mimetic power, each viewing condemns us to endlessly re-live a traumatic event that has already occurred. The video is not fixed, but is infinitely accessible through interpretation and re-contextualization, thus becoming a mutable point of reference.

The difference between Griffith's sequence and the Zapruder video is not only that of a meticulous *mise-en-scène* and an unedited piece of amateur movie footage, but above all that of Hollywood's narrative closure and the nightmarish present of the ultimate open text of our visual contemporary culture. At the time of *Birth of a Nation*, film was shifting from what Tom Gunning calls a "cinema of attractions" (1991: 6), to a cinema of narrative integration, which subordinates film form to character and plot development. Griffith introduced this move toward the conventions of Hollywood cinema, which involved the use of the parallel montage, a shift in acting from an exaggerated and histrionic style to a more subtle and restrained style, the use of expressive lighting in key shots and a narrative balance achieved through the mediation of family romances in historically significant settings. This method remained a staple of Hollywood cinema and was still very much alive in the sound- era three-hour epics of the period between 1956 and 1963. Films such as *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957), *Ben Hur* (William Wyler, 1957), *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), *Laurence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962) and *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963) revitalized Griffith's heritage by re-proposing the idea of deluxe, big screen entertainment made of huge sets, casts of thousands, spectacular battle scenes, and a three-hour format with intermission (one who believes in coincidences could note that the era of the Hollywood epic concludes the same year as Kennedy's assassination).

Diametrically opposed to Hollywood epics, the unpolished Zapruder video is a visual sampling of a recent historical event that needs to be

---

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the scenarios manufactured around the assassination and their impact in American culture see Bruzzi (2006: 17–26) and Simon (1996: 35–54).

repeated, retold, and reframed in an endless hermeneutic process. When replayed, this involuntary fragment of imperfect cinema implies a perspective from which historical events appear without the mitigating circumstances of their transitory nature. If Griffith's classic cinematic time can be geometrically imagined as a straight line composed of single frames inexorably progressing toward a climax (the triumphal arrival of the Ku Klux Klan at the end of the film), the time of the Zapruder video is circular – it loops like a snake devouring its own tail/tale. The document revealed to conspiracy filmmakers that the rhetorical figure of the replay brings with itself the possibility of a different cinematic time, and thus, the possibility of a different way of re-presenting and re-constructing actual events in contrast with the Hollywood epic approach to history.

It was not only the Zapruder film that propelled conspiracy films in the US, but also the censorship and manipulation to which it was subject throughout the years. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, three television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) engaged in four days of uninterrupted coverage. However, they decided not to show Zapruder's images. As one NBC producer unequivocally put it, "the inside of a man's brain being outside was too awful to broadcast" (in Marriott, 2007: 109).<sup>3</sup> The document was first shown on television on March 6, 1975, on the ABC broadcast "Goodnight America." This means that for twelve years the images accidentally caught by Zapruder were only known as single frames published in Volume 18 of the Warren Commission Report and in *Life Magazine*, which secured the rights to the Zapruder film on the night of the assassination. However, *Life* omitted the fatal shot to Kennedy's head from early publications of the film images, as these frames were deemed too traumatic to show to the readers;<sup>4</sup> while in the Warren Commission Report two frames were accidentally reversed, which gave the impression that Kennedy's head was thrust forward by the impact of the bullet, thus indirectly supporting the Commission's lone gunman theory.

Because of its low technical quality and being mediated by Zapruder's limited perspective, the video's status as historical evidence was ambiguous. It could only show its value as explicit raw footage of a man dying in the arms of his wife, but it could not reveal why and by whom the president was murdered. Even imagining, as Pier Paolo Pasolini did in *Heretical*

<sup>3</sup> It is ironic that TV cameras broadcast Oswald's assassination live, just two days after Kennedy's.

<sup>4</sup> Thirty-one selected frames were published in black and white in the November 29, 1963 issue. Frames were also published in color in the December 7, 1963 special "John F. Kennedy Edition," and in issues dated October 2, 1964 (a special article on the film and the Warren Commission Report that came out that year). This time the magazine printed the graphic frame 313, which depicts the president's head exploding. However, *Life* republished the frames in support of what was written by the Warren Commission, neglecting to identify the images with their proper number and changing their original layout.

*Empiricism*, that there was a professional movie troupe in Dallas that day, with complete equipment, shooting from multiple angles an ideal film sequence of the murder scene, we could only have a more precise idea of the ballistic details of the homicide (e.g. the number and the positions of the assassin/assassins). Yet, even this evidence would not reveal whether there was a conspiracy or not behind the president's killing (1998: 233–37). The Zapruder video's promise, which generates the psychological desire to replay and analyze it, is to reveal what will remain beyond it: the motivations and the causes of the action it depicts.

### Let it Bleed (Side One)

A few years after the Zapruder video, *Gimme Shelter* (Albert and David Maysles, 1970) once again addresses the limited possibility of fully seeing and understanding an event as well as the discrepancy between what is seen and the "truth". The film is an example of a convergence of intentions between conspiracy films and direct cinema documentary. Adopting a non-chronological narrative order and a self-reflexive approach to the events, *Gimme Shelter* portrays of the 1969 free Rolling Stones concert at Altamont Speedway near San Francisco. Albert Maysles' camera captured the fatal stabbing of an audience member, Meredith Hunter, by one of the Hell's Angels, which occurred within a few feet of the stage. However, the murder footage has limited sight, in that it can only show what a particular operator was able to see through his lens at a given moment.

This footage is analyzed in a meta-documentary sequence, where the Maysles brothers bring us into the editing room. They repeatedly run the footage of Hunter's stabbing forward and backward in slow motion in the presence of Mick Jagger. The editing room becomes a means by which the Maysles brothers force a difficult confrontation between Jagger's persona and his rock star ego. In this crucial staged encounter between liveness and recorded image, the singer is reduced to a spectator of the rock performance, and comments on his own recollection of the incident. However, the recorded version of the events is able to reveal much more about what happened.

DAVID MAYSLES: Did you see what was happening there?

MICK JAGGER: No, you couldn't see anything. Well, it was another scuffle.

DM: There's the Angel, right there, with the knife (pauses the video on a still image).

MJ: Where's the gun?

DM: I'll roll it back. You'll see it against the girl's crocheted dress.

MJ: Right there, isn't it? (long pause) Oh, it was so horrible.

While generally Hollywood cinema organizes its narrative structure through the use of the flashback, the editing room sequence replaces the flashback with the replay. The rhetorical figures of the replay allow some further consideration about the different articulation toward cinema and television's relationship with time. The replay implies a refusal of the idea that any past exists; it is an eternal present of a moment that is repeated, re-seen, re-actualized as former present that re-presents itself and, in doing so, is emphasized, through the use of slow motion, to avoid the fact that there is an alternative to what is shown on screen. However, the recorded images are unable to disclose fundamental details about the culpability of the attacker, who claimed to act in self-defense, and the victim, who was in possession of a gun.<sup>5</sup> Even in slow motion, the events are difficult to discern; the gun Hunter holds when D. Maysles pauses the footage is merely a shadow against his girlfriend's dress, and the Angel's knife just a glimmer of steel. The protagonists of the fight are surrounded by a combination of fog, dust, and smoke which makes the details hard to discern on film. In addition, the document itself cannot resolve the debate about the responsibility of the Rolling Stones and their management in the inadequate and hasty planning of the event. In *Gimme Shelter* the Rolling Stones are shown to be less guilty of the Altamont fiasco than are the people to whom the quasi-corporation rock band had to delegate much of their business. The Maysles brothers trace the scenario of legal and logistical complications behind the festival, while also intervening in the modernist debate about the nature of observing and being observed. Rather than holding their footage as a definitive source, they assert that their documentary cannot be the only measure of seeing the musical event (whose implications became political, sociological, and historical).

Critic Pauline Kael, who in other circumstances wrote extensively on conspiracy films, was dismissive of *Gimme Shelter*. Her review in the December 1970 issue of the *New Yorker* called the film "disingenuous moviemaking," and encouraged the filmmakers to "drop the Miss Innocence act and tell us the straight story of the background to these events." The critic insinuated that the Maysles brothers played a part in setting up the events at Altamont, and that much of what transpired was done for the sake of the camera.

*The free concert was staged and lighted to be photographed, and three hundred thousand people who attended it were the unpaid cast of thousands...Musically Jagger has no way to cool the violence because his*

<sup>5</sup> After viewing footage of Hunter's stabbing, police arrested Alan Passarro, a local Hell's Angel, and charged him with murder. At his trial, however, Passarro was acquitted on grounds of self-defense.

*orgiastic kind of music has only one way to go – higher, until everyone is knocked out... It's impossible to say how much moviemaking is responsible for those consequences, but it is a factor, and with the commercial success of this kind of film it's going to be a bigger factor...It doesn't look so fraudulent if a director excites people to commit violent acts on camera, and the events becomes free publicity for the film* (in Macdonald and Cousins, 1998: 273–278).

The Maysles and the Stones as unwitting plotters in the counterculture implosion, the failure of rock music, free love and permissiveness? This qualifies as an extravagant conspiracy theory. *Gimme Shelter* was not staged for filming, but as it appears from the choice and tone of the words, Kael had no sympathy for the band. Nevertheless, once we dismiss her personal accusations against the Maysles brothers (whose entire career is animated by a candid and untiring democratic idealism), her review evidenced an important internal contradiction of American documentary in the post-JFK assassination cultural environment. In order to unfold it, I must move back to a consideration of a breakthrough cinematic tendency called “direct cinema,” of which the Maysles brothers are among the most representative pioneers, and JFK one of the selected filmic subjects.

### Rewind: Notes on Direct Cinema

Roughly a decade before *Gimme Shelter*, in 1960, Albert and David Maysles joined a group of direct cinema filmmakers assembled by Robert Drew known as the Drew Associates. Among them were important figures such as Richard Leacock, and D.A. Pennebaker.<sup>6</sup> The Drew Associates considered television, which was slowly replacing the motion picture as the major visual force of the twentieth century, as a medium with potential for exhibition of their experimental form of nonfiction. The one-hour format of Drew Associates' documentaries was modeled on that of television reportage such as *The March of Time*, *This is America*, *See it Now*, and *CBS Reports*. At the same time, the Drew Associates work constituted a departure from conventional pre-1960 documentaries, and both NBC and ABC rejected their works. Executives were hesitant about their apparent non-narrative structure (voice-over is limited to two minutes and there is not a thesis-led structure), the poor lighting, the at times inadequate sound, the restless handheld cameras and the blurred, grainy visuals - all elements that give the impression of unedited raw footage. What went unnoticed was the fact that this

---

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of direct cinema, see Saunders' *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and Politics of the Sixties and Bruzzi* (2006: 73–80).

fluid cinematography was organized by a meticulous editing and a frequent use of parallel montage to create inherent patterns.

Direct cinema filmmakers were born watchers, almost predatory viewers. They tended to move furtively around their subjects with their lightweight equipment, or to wait unblinking in a concealed position. Technically, early direct cinema pioneers preferred a shoulder-mounted 16mm camera such as the Auricon, but also used the Arriflex or French Éclair-NPR. They also employed a compact, lightweight sound recorder using 1/4" tape (usually a Nagra, Nagra Neo-Pilot, or Stellavox) (Monaco, 2001: 203). Theoretically, their observational documentary project appeared like an updated variation on André Bazin's "myth of total cinema," in addition to an American take on early neorealism and Cesare Zavattini's poetic of the foreshadowing. As modernists, direct cinema filmmakers tended at the same time to be self-conscious, concerning themselves with how they technically came across their subjects with their apparatus in order to be as unobtrusive as possible. They aspired to invisibility; however in many sequences operators, cameras, and microphones appear on screen (a tradition that was already a manner when *Gimme Shelter* was shot). This was another device they used in order to demonstrate the apparently uncut authenticity of their documentaries.

Direct cinema's dynamic resembles that of voyeurism. However, while voyeurism involves espial (i.e. watching people who don't know you're there as they go about the mundane business of private life), direct cinema was different from genuine espial. The people filmmakers were shooting were not unaware of the fact that somebody was recording them. In direct cinema documentaries the subjects' rapport with the camera is vital, and the film's success depended upon the subject's ability to appear natural and at ease while being filmed. For example, the alchemy between director and the documentary subject worked particularly well in the trilogy the Drew Associates dedicated to Kennedy, whose presidential mandate roughly coincided with the advent of direct cinema. The politician was filmed in *Primary* (1960), *Adventures of the New Frontier* (1961) and *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* (1963). How did Kennedy manage to remain an idealized figure while being filmed for several days? And above all, how do we begin distinguishing the politician's performance for the camera in seemingly behind the scenes shots from that of a staged presidential appearance seen on television?<sup>7</sup>

*Primary* follows the then senator Kennedy and his rival for the Democratic nomination, Humbert Humphrey, through the Wisconsin election. The film's most expressive shot is A. Maysles' hand-held tracking shot of

<sup>7</sup> For an understanding of voyeurism and the logics of television, cfr. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U. S. Fiction."

Kennedy (taken closely from behind) making his way through a crowd in a Polish-Catholic Hall in Milwaukee. This 75-second sequence is filmed in a strictly observational style and was uncut in the final editing. The camera follows Kennedy's arrival down a long corridor, up a stairway, through a doorway, and finally out onto a stage before a cheering crowd. A. Maysles quickly constructed a solid reputation, with Jean-Luc Godard calling him "the greatest cameraman in America" (in Vogels, 2005: 5), and this shot, first imitated by Pennebaker in *Don't Look Back* (1967), has become standard in music documentaries and rock star biopics. It was notably not employed again in *Gimme Shelter*, but A. Maysles did reproduce it in reverse in the recent *Shine a Light* (Martin Scorsese, 2007), when the Rolling Stones are followed while leaving the theater after a performance.

As a general principle, *Primary's* editing attempts to treat both candidates even-handedly, cutting back and forth between the two, but in the final product it is evident that such a structure does not make the film value-neutral. The sequences in which the troupe follows Humphrey are generally more formal and reserved. Without a doubt Humphrey has an everyman appeal, but his smile has an unbecoming rigidity and his speeches and interviews possess the redundancy of a bad lecture. On the contrary, his more photogenic rival becomes accessible to the viewers through his ability to deliver a non-performance, to affect casual disregard for the cameras that are pursuing him.

There is a similar dynamic in *Crisis*, which follows the difficult build up to the racial integration of the University of Alabama, a shift that John Kennedy and his brother Robert (then Attorney General) support and which George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, opposes. The president exudes a measure of authority and calm as he is captured on camera in long, reactive close-ups, considering the advice being proffered by others and rocking in his Oval Office chair. On the contrary, Wallace appears filmed at a distance by a static camera while greeting his child, conducting us in the realm of boredom by offering a formal tour of his collection of oil paintings of Civil War leaders. The director's strategy consists in framing these public figures within a crisis structure.

The pursuit of events with a built-in narrative was one of the trademarks of early direct cinema, as this circumvented the problem of feeling compelled to impose a narrative on events to render the film comprehensible and digestible. The aim of the Drew Associates was to find and film events that were monumental - events that were so significant in themselves that their filming seemed, to the participant of the crisis, unimportant by comparison. The series of events portrayed in each documentary is predestined to follow a logical, closed path. However, in the editing room there is a discrimination or hierarchical placement of the raw material; major and minor

crises are valued according to their political, social, and ideological importance. Despite this, the Drew Associates members always maintained that they conceived these documentaries as a substitute for true espial, minimizing the choices operated in the editing room and the complicity of their subjects. *Adventures on the New Frontier* portrays Kennedy in the first days at the White House wrapped up in work on poverty in West Virginia, the Cold War in Africa, and military maneuvers off Cuba. Robert Drew stated that the president “had forgotten the camera so completely that when, in a meeting with the Joint Chiefs, the subject turned toward Cuba, a general had to remind the president that the camera was still there.”<sup>8</sup> This may be the case, but more realistically, it seems that the cinematic subject was only pretending ignorance. The Drew Associates were the first filmmakers to be admitted into the White House, 1960s handheld cameras were not that small, and Kennedy was an astute politician. He must have been constantly aware of the three-person cinematic troupe in his office, capturing such critical documentary material. Thus, what we see in these works is far from stolen footage, but was instead proffered democratic propaganda that the directors chose to ignore.

Illusions of privileged access to the Oval Office require complicity from the viewer. The fantasy that in watching Drew Associates’ films we are transcending presidential privacy is more appealing than the notion that direct cinema subjects knew they were being watched. Kennedy was gifted in seeming unwatched – an art that politicians were just beginning to learn at that moment. The majority of Kennedy’s colleagues (Humphrey, Wallace, and the famous case of Nixon) acted when a camera was pointed at them: they appeared stiff with self-consciousness. They were, in terms of being on camera, rank amateurs. Direct cinema implicitly requested that its subject break from self-consciousness in front of a camera, not worrying about how they came across, as this was the directors’ task.

Watching the JFK trilogy, one may perceive closeness to the president; however, he moves in a different sphere of the powerful White House elite, which becomes accessible to the viewers via direct cinema documentaries. Kennedy’s ability to appear natural in front of the camera goes along with the technological advances available to the filmmakers and their observational style. JFK happened to be one of the most talented non-professional actors seen in modernist cinema. Although there were significant exceptions, such as *Salesmen* (Albert and David Maysles, 1968), the majority of direct cinema works by the Drew Associates filmmakers are dedicated to stars such as Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Truman Capote, or Marlon Brando, as well as rock festivals such as Woodstock, Monterey Pop and Altamont.

<sup>8</sup> Drew Associates Website. 23 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.drewassociates.net/Main/verite.htm>>.

## Let it Bleed (Side Two)

In light of this, it is easier to understand how *Gimme Shelter* follows early direct cinema's heritage, but above all, how it represents a significant rupture toward the territory of the Zapruder video and assassination conspiracy films. The choice to interrupt the images' phenomenological flow with the already discussed replay sequence reveals that the directors perceived the revelatory inadequacy of the concert footage itself; hence the decision to return to it with a more analytical approach, while furnishing Jagger's own extra-commentary. It is in this circumstance that the Maysles break direct cinema's whole mirror of illusions, mediating the concert's raw footage via careful editing.

Talking to the Stones at the beginning of *Gimme Shelter*, after over a decade of activity and self-indulgence, the directors clarify their authorial control: "We may be on you for a minute and then go to almost anything." The Maysles stop pretending to be invisible filmmakers, conceiving themselves as a sort of metaphysical presence recording events as they happen. Instead, they take responsibility for the editorial control of their work and admit the impossibility of furnishing a plausible reconstruction of the Altamont concert tragedy. Since what they are offering in this movie is not only a realistic representation of violence, drug use, and nudity, but also the footage of a real murder, the Maysles had no choice; they needed to examine and analytically process the evidence collected at the festival.

The Maysles brothers' film suggested that the generational rebellion would not be followed by a catharsis but by the taste of disillusionment. *Gimme Shelter* is *Woodstock* (Michael Wadleigh, 1970) minus the sexual joy, *Monterey Pop* (D. A. Pennebaker, 1968) minus the psychedelic glamour. In the documentary the Stones seem to experience a certain degree of self-loathing, almost a perception of sin. What generates the movie's paralysis is that the Rolling Stones are nothing like Kennedy. Effective on stage (the film opens with a memorable version of "Jumpin' Jack Flash" and "Satisfaction"), they are uptight and self-conscious behind the scenes. In order to put the stars at ease (while also giving the audience a brief relief), the Maysles decided to film an entire sequence at Muscle Shoals studio. We see the Stones listening to their own ballad "Wild Horses" in playback, while a continuous, apparently interminable long take scans the room. However, even in this circumstance, the band remains impassive and non-reactive, and the cameraman's phenomenological interest ends up falling on Richard's tapping his snakeskin boots, then on Jagger's pout, and finally on Charlie Watts' unblinking glare at the lens. The drummer recognizes the camera's focus on him and directly confronts the filmmakers for a few seconds, in which neither he nor A. Maysles wants to look away. This becomes another moment

of admittance of the artifice of the behind the scenes view offered by direct cinema.

In a way the Stones' uneasiness is understandable. The other direct cinema music documentaries of the 1960s work effectively because they generally do not portray youth idols behind the scenes, or, when they do so, they show them in provocative poses while smoking, drinking, or surrounded by adoring fans. In contrast to a politician like Kennedy, who can reinforce his image by revealing himself as a family man or as an office worker, the last thing 1960s and 1970s rock stars wanted was to disclose that, at times, their daily routine was as boring as anyone else's. This included planning, telephone calls, and a certain discipline to stay on a tour schedule. Without a doubt the demystification of stardom is one of the ultimate goals of the Maysles.<sup>9</sup>

I can now return to the point Kael was trying to make in her review: the idea that direct cinema was based on a paradox. The more acceptable violent images were in American culture after the Zapruder video, the further direct cinema had to go in order to preserve the sense of inaccessibility that was essential to its appeal. The oppositional relation to Hollywood's fictional world and conservative values shape the very contours of direct cinema's documentary authenticity. At a time in which film industry and television newsreel had already tested new limits, with reenacted bloodbaths and shocking images of the Vietnam war, it is not difficult to predict where direct cinema would have had to go in order to retain its edge. Whether or not this was a conscious process (I am convinced it was not), the tendency that Kael was warning against is where the horizon of the late 1960s/early 1970s American visual culture was heading. *Gimme Shelter* bears comparison with the snuff movie idea of going all the way to the moment of death. In this sense, like the Zapruder footage, the murder of Meredith Hunter in *Gimme Shelter* becomes another epistemological break. Going all the way now could encompass the possibility, already imagined by Bazin but not widely contemplated in American popular filmic imagination, of "the perverse pleasure of witnessing the involuntary spasm of death" (Williams L., 1989: 193). Both the Zapruder video and *Gimme Shelter* did register respectively the violent spasms of Kennedy's body after the throat wound and

<sup>9</sup> Even in Scorsese's more recent *Shine a light*, the Stones appear more uneasy than ever when they meet the Clintons before their show, and Bill Clinton announces that he is going to bring 11-year-olds to the concert. With palpable embarrassment, everyone stands on the stage and waits for Hillary's mother to arrive. Richards is the only one to openly ignore the politicians and his friends, and starts playing a melodious harp on his acoustic guitar. In the background, we still hear and see the Clintons and the rest of the band, but thanks to Richards' music we cannot distinguish what they are saying. It is logical that the ultimate nightmare of 1960s alternative culture icons who used to sing songs such as "Sympathy for the Devil" is to become an institutionalized band, or worse, an early teenage or family band.

the fatal headshot, and of Hunter's body after the numerous stabbings. The question is whether or not is it possible, from an ethical point of view, to maintain a strictly observational attitude, the camera focused and the subject in frame in front of an actual death. In the Zapruder case, the amateur operator holding the camera reacts to the shots with some evident oscillations and Kennedy's body remains barely in frame. In *Gimme Shelter*, the predatory/professional instinct of the best cameramen in America to shift the focus away from the performance and toward the audience prevails.

With *Gimme Shelter*, the crisis narrative that characterized direct cinema since the early works of the Drew Associates threatened to result in an ethical impasse. The strategy of re-evaluating and re-examining the incriminated footage on screen is the one that defines *Gimme Shelter* as the documentary that buried direct cinema. Not coincidentally, it represents a turning point in the Maysles brothers' career. Their subsequent films eliminated this crisis structure, featuring non-celebrities or artists whose fame was distinctly more limited (*Christo's Valley Curtain*, *Grey Gardens*, and *Running Fence*). Perhaps, it was the Rolling Stones themselves who did not resolve the artistic and ethical impasse of *Gimme Shelter*. The still image of Jagger toward the end of the film can be seen as a metaphor of what became of the band after the documentary. As *Shine a Light* clearly demonstrates, they kept (re) playing the same act over and over. Although they were eminent in acting as if the Altamont incident had never happened, that night it seems creativity and time stopped for them.

### Screening the Flow

The narrative strategy of *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974) constitutes an example of the incorporation of the rhetorical figures of repetition and replay into an American conspiracy film. Pakula depicts the final stage in the relationship between individuals and the new economic order, considering the country and the urban areas as (equally corrupted) fragments of the same whole, documenting Jameson's model of global "Totality as Conspiracy." It was with this work that American cinema found a vocabulary by which paranoia and the implications of political murder could be expressed. The film draws from the thriller genre formula (the generation of suspense), classic film noir (a contrasted lighting portraying the urban landscape as a menacing place of entrapment, circularity and death), and direct cinema (the hand-held documentary-like techniques in the opening sequence, inspired by the assassination of Robert Kennedy). However in the end, the film breaks each of these categories from the inside resulting in an innovative conspiracy film.

*The Parallax View* represents more than simply the title of Pakula's work,

a methodological approach to which philosopher Slavoj Žižek recently dedicated a book. Parallax, or more accurately, motion parallax (etymologically meaning “alteration”) is the change of angular position of two stationary points relative to each other as seen by an observer, due to the motion of the observer. It is the apparent shift of an object against a background due to a change in observer position dictated by the director, generating an impossible short circuit of levels which can never meet: the old frontier imagery and late capitalist modernization. These phenomena, “can be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible” (Žižek, 2006: 4). Thus there is no shared space between the two levels, although they are closely connected, even identical. Although they are linked, they are two sides of the same phenomenon that can never meet, if not at the cost of imploding into one another. The force of *The Parallax View* lies in this capacity not to unify the two views, but to look at them from both sides, placing modernization against different backgrounds in order to catch the complexities of its manifestations.

The film takes as its starting point the Warren Commission’s alleged whitewash and the rumors surrounding the mysterious circumstances of the deaths of a number of eyewitnesses in the years immediately following JFK’s assassination. The theme of the elimination of witnesses to political assassinations is at the core of Pakula’s work, which is concerned with the investigative reporter Joe Frady (Warren Beatty), who treads a thin line between a counterculture lifestyle and the journalistic profession. Noting the insufficiency of authorities’ procedures following a senator’s assassination, Frady engages in speculations of his own devising, attempts to infiltrate the Parallax Corporation, and becomes a candidate for a bureau that recruits assassins for political targets. In a crucial sequence, he submits himself to an employment test. The reversal of the traditional selection criteria for selecting candidates operated by the Parallax Corporation is interesting, since up to that historic moment the structural opposite of the faceless corporation man remained the passive or malleable subject. On the contrary, in the Parallax Corporation the disruptive violent personalities of those who are against the existing social order can be redirected as functional contributors to a new social order, in which politicians are killed with impunity. Bureaucracy is able to win over the unstable elements of society, not by using extensive examination procedures to screen out undesirable personality traits, but precisely to select potential candidates who possess those traits.

In the screening test, every image, antagonistic or edifying, produced by the spectacle society is inserted into a new narrative, which is an allegory of good and evil, family and country versus the enemy, the pathos of rich and poor. The oscillation of the slideshow images, pushed by the soundtrack,

in the end becomes so rapid as to associate the presidential images with the Nazi and communist leaders, international wars, family, state, race, all studied to generate resentment. The psychotic characters are the only ones able to pass the screening test and thus to qualify for the openings as professional political assassins. On the one hand, this convulsive sequence apparently frustrates any attempt to make sense of their interrelationships. On the other hand, Pakula's montage is able to strip general connotations from each slide and to twist every reassuring image toward its opposite. Thus, the ideal family is contrasted with the starving and disturbed family, love becomes hatred, sex becomes pornography, and so on. In particular, white middle-class American fantasies are sublimated in the Marvel Comics' version of Thor, an avenger paired with the words "me," "country," and images of Kennedy, gold bullets, and postcard-like wheat fields. Another significant juxtaposition joins a photograph of Oswald with the word "me," a linkage that anticipates the way the corporation will ultimately employ Frady. As the film progresses, we find out that the test serves not only to individuate potential killers but also for likely candidates on whom to place the blame. The ending is similarly calculated: peaceful images of nature and a group of boys together lead to the word "happiness" following the violence of the preceding clip.

The metafictional sequence interrupts the narrative of the political assassination thriller sub-genre, overwhelming the screen with fast-paced Americana imagery, becoming a metaphor for the conflicting values any individual is subjected to in modern Western democracies. In particular, the scene subtly registers the negotiable status of the image as it operated in the political assassination debates, its tendency to slip into illegibility or be forced into opposite interpretations that exist simultaneously (Horton, 66– 67).<sup>10</sup> The inferior quality of the stereotyped images seen in the test sequence belongs to television rather to cinema. Television mediates actual events; it disjoins and fragments. Pakula is not simply articulating a political or ideological statement, but rather furnishing a commentary on the small screen logic, going along with Raymond Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Although Williams argues that there is a need to analyze

---

<sup>10</sup> *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962) appears to be a propeller for this type of fictional conspiracy film. The film narrates the story of a Korean War hero, Robert Shaw, who is brainwashed while a prisoner of war under the communist Chinese and programmed against his conscious knowledge to become a political killer under the control of his contacts in the United States. The film is effective in employing a cross editing between illusion and reality during the brainwashing sequence. However Frankenheimer continuously switches viewpoints during this sequence to allow the audience to experience both the brainwashing and the reality of the training (the Chinese captors and the American prisoners). In this sense, Pakula goes one step further toward aligning our point of view with that of Frady, as we are made to experience the film just as Frady experiences it.

discrete programs, he nevertheless emphasizes that critics should analyze television as an entire movement, or flow, of textual materials that parade on us on any single occasion. Rather than thinking about program units (a model from the theater), we need to think about the entire schedule; rather than thinking of commercials and interruptions, we need to think of them as an integral part of television's textual process; rather than thinking only about the message of a program, we need to think about the mobile flow of fragmented sounds and images into one another (Williams R, 1992: 80-90).

What the *Parallax View* reveals in Williams's theory is that this process or flow involves a heavy use of replay/repetition. In *The Parallax View's* test screening, it would be impossible for the criminal media expert to achieve the desired effect of generating resentment in the candidate without using combinatory patterns of repetition. In television broadcasting it is sufficient to return to the key images of the television coverage of Kennedy's death. These are the shootings of Lee Harvey Oswald, Caroline Kennedy and her mother kneeling beside the presidential coffin, John-John Kennedy's respectful salute, the eternal flame and the riderless horse. These moments have been replayed over and over not only during the four days following JFK's death, but also in the following years, and are present even in the era of cable and digital television. However, following Williams' logic, we cannot circumscribe the field of analysis of television to newsreel and historical documents. For in the endless flow of television it would easily happen, especially on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, that images related to Kennedy would be mixed with other more recent catastrophes as well as sports, reality shows, and entertainment, exactly as it plays out in *The Parallax View* montage of archetypical TV images, which can be re-narrativized at a second level to generate a certain effect.

JFK's assassination as documented in the Zapruder video, with its repeated but never less incredible images, haunted American visual culture, at a point in which the country was switching to its late capitalist phase. The nature of the event, its cultural and psychological impact, generated a loss of illusions for many US citizens. The withering away of the epistemological certainties raised questions about the ontology and purpose of the image, generating a widespread distrust toward the immediacy of visual representation. The conspiracy films and social documentaries I have analyzed adopted two main strategies: one was to reveal the artifices and the subjective components characteristic of every image (the metafictional sequences and the replays are often the films' key moments), the other was to systematically evaluate those images, beginning with their origins, their condition of fabrication, and their addressee.

REFERENCES

- Bazin, André (2005): *What is Cinema?* 2 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bruzzi, Stella (2006): *New Documentary*. London: Routledge.
- Gunning, Tom (1991): *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Horton, Andrew (1986): "Political Assassination and Cinema: Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View*". *Persistence of Vision*, vol. ¾, 61–70.
- Jameson, Fredric (1995): *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Macdonald, Karl and Mark Cousins (1998): *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Marriott, Stephanie. *Live Television* (2007): *Time, Space and the Broadcast Event*. London: Sage.
- Monaco, Paul (2001): *The Sixties, 1960–69*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo (1988): *Heretical Empiricism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ray, Robert R. (1985): *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema: 1930–1980*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Simon, Art (1996): *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Saunders, Dave (2007): *Direct Cinema. Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Vogels, Jonathan (2005): *The Direct Cinema of David and Albert Maysles*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Wallace, David F. (1993): "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2. Summer: 151–194.
- Williams, Linda (1989): *Hard Core*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Williams, Raymond (1992): *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2006): *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.