



Gimme Shelter

On December 9, 1969 Mick Jagger, the bisexual demi-god of rock who had danced on the edge of apocalypse so long, suddenly danced right into it, helpless to protect himself or his followers. "Altamont" became a watershed event in the history of the counter culture. The day took its toll both in immediate and long-range effects: four persons were dead, one murdered, dozens seriously injured, the fragile Woodstock peacelove bubble dramatically burst, the Hell's Angels were deromanticized and relegated to their pre-Kesey status, hippie arteries hardened, and rock took a definite turn toward the wistful and melancholic. Altamont, like the Manson murders several months before, became a symbolic event in the hippie litany of bad karma; it was to the sixties youth underground what Dallas, Tonkin Bay and Chappaquidick were to the sixties liberals.

The disaster at Altamont threw the youth prophets and merchandisers into a painful dilemma: a new gruesome reality had suddenly emerged and had to be somehow confronted and, hopefully, packaged and sold. Caught in this crunch were several veteran *cinéma-vérité* documentarians, David and Albert Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, whose cameras had captured all the action, including the murder. Like the dazed, bleeding hippies the Maysles were caught in the center of violent change; Altamont became for the Maysles, as it had for the hippies, a symbolic, watershed event. Altamont was the cauldron in which the Maysles' method of film-making, both vices and virtues, were tested and magnified, and it is test which they failed.

The Maysles brothers were probably not the best representatives of *cinéma-vérité* to take this test: even before Altamont, they had one of the shiftest aesthetics going. When accused of altering reality, they would contend they were artists; when accused of being second-rate artists, they would contend they were simply documentarians. The paradox of the Maysles' film-making approach had been known for some time and discussed at length in film journals in the fall of 1964. Critics and viewers often found themselves caught in the classic double squeeze: did the Maysles' admitted intervention in and tampering with reality serve the Truth as they claimed, or did it serve their particular, and rather unrewarding, truth? At that time the debate was rather academic and the Maysles' inner contradictions of minor importance: after all, the Maysles were pioneering in film techniques and their subjects (Joe Levine, the Beatles) were such that if they were ambiguously portrayed, nothing great was lost.

But now the Maysles with *Gimme Shelter* have become the exclusive documentarians of a major event with serious ramifications, and the tired *cinéma-vérité* debate takes an urgent turn. What had previously seemed only contradictory or confused, now seems pernicious or reprehensible; what was previously passable or clever now seems morally irresponsible (or, conversely, brilliant to some).

Gimme Shelter clearly has more intrinsic



importance that anything the Maysles have ever filmed, and the audience clearly expects more than anything the Maysles have previously given. Altamont was the story a reporter or a documentarian works a lifetime for. The Maysles had, for the first time in the careers, film which was inherently popular, footage which had already been subpoenaed by a grand jury and which millions would be willing to pay to see.

But the windfall of Altamont had equally serious drawbacks. It was not a lowlife or personality study, but an event with built-in preconditioned responses. The awaiting audience already knew all the details and events of the film; and for film-makers who were often accused of failing to get underneath the surface of interesting subjects, this was the crucial test. The ramifications of the event had been felt for over a year; the viewer was coming to judge the past. Even if there were no artistic interpretation of Altamont in the film, the viewer would read it in.

The simple presence of a murder on screen makes the film difficult to objectively assess (as it made it difficult to objectively edit); some critics seem to think the film has artistic merit simply because a man is killed on screen; others, more hysterically, feel that being objective about the murder does violence to the shade of the murdered man (in its coverage of Altamont *Rolling Stone* magazine literally cursed attorney Melvin Belli for being more concerned with the legal implications of the murder than the dead man himself). But the murder itself is neither cause for praise or panic; but like the audience preconditioning, the murder brings stress to the structure of the film, requiring that it elucidate rather than exploit Meredith Hunter's death.

Gimme Shelter is not, after all, simply a Zapruder film for the hippie generation. The Maysles did not, like Abram Zapruder, sell their sensational footage and make a clean getaway; instead they choose to carefully edit it into a feature-length film, and in so doing made pretensions toward being able to organize and comprehend the event.

Never before was a concrete artistic vision so clearly demanded of the Maysles brothers. As any trial lawyer can testify, the objectivity of a witness diminishes in direct ratio to his

involvement, and even if the Maysles choose to be one hundred percent objective, they could not have been. Altamont was instead the sort of event which demanded the aesthetic reportage of a Mailer or Capote or, at least, the wit of a Pepys. The audiences would flock to *Gimme Shelter* no matter what; but they had already seen the bones of the skeleton all too clearly, what they *needed* was some meat to put on those bones.

Even if the Maysles will not publicly admit it, they sensed the need for an artistic overview in *Gimme Shelter*. At least they have applied more manipulations to the reality of *Gimme Shelter* than they have to the reality of any of their previous films. The film shifts freely from three different times and places; Rolling Stones Jagger and Charlie Watts are allowed to comment on footage of both the Altamont and Madison Square Garden concerts; evaluative radio commentary about Altamont is introduced before the concert comes on screen. These are all obvious artistic organizing devices and because of them, I think, the film can and should be judged artistically. *Gimme Shelter* could be faulted for faking real situations (how did the Maysles get the obvious continuity shot of the Disk Jockey announcing the concert if they did not set it up themselves?), but it is more enlightening to analyze it as art.

Although the Maysles prefer to consider *Gimme Shelter* a relatively straightforward presentation of "the news," one can evaluate their artistry by implication. In *Gimme Shelter* there are at least four definite artistic decisions which indicate the quality of the film-makers. They are:

(1) *artificially created suspense.* *Gimme Shelter* is structured with both ends moving toward the middle. The Altamont concert occurred in the middle of the Stones' U.S. tour, and the film freely intercuts between the finish of the tour (Madison Square Garden) and the beginning (Muscle Shoals). The chronology of the tour put the Maysles in an awkward position: if they had followed chronology everything after Altamont would have been a let down. Instead, the Maysles opted for another mistake, to hype the film toward the murder finale. In so doing they create phoney suspense (since everyone

knows it's coming) and get neither distance nor involvement. After an hour and a half of artificial build-up, the murder itself is a let-down, just a scrap of film with one man stabbing another. The audience has great expectations for *Gimme Shelter*, and the Maysles in effect prey on those expectations rather than transcending them. (As an alternative, for example, the film could have shown the murder first and worked back to it again. This would have purged the viewer of emotional anticipation on the first viewing, and enabled him to see it in deeper context the second.)

(2) *montage cliches.* The Maysles shoot their montages as if they were laying out a special supplement for *Life*. There are convenient lumpings of dancing people, sleeping people, bad trips, sweet highs, Hell's Angels, spaced-out cats, and so on. The montages fit into pre-existing categories and in no way enlarge upon the conventional myth of rock audiences. The concert audience is somehow expected to be the backboard for murder and tragedy, yet it is given little chance for resonance.

(3) *parallel cutting.* Perhaps the Maysles' most irresponsible artistic intervention occurs in their film juxtaposition. Many examples could be cited, but one stands out: the first section of *Gimme Shelter* contains footage of Tina Turner singing "I've Been Loving You Too Long" at Madison Square Garden. "Too Long" is a 4-5 minute soulful come-on routine in which Tina sings softer and softer, then bursts into an orgasmic finale full of moaning intimations of fellatio and masturbation. In *Shelter* the Maysles start the sequence with Tina singing, then cut to Jagger's dressing room. The camera focuses on Jagger's bare back, closes in on a cross he is wearing; Tina's voice grows quieter and gradually drops completely off the soundtrack. After some additional footage of Jagger, Tina and her accompaniment drift back onto the track and there is a cut back to Tina. But it is much later in the song—there has been a camouflaged jump in time—and Tina is now in the throws of her finale, symbolically violating herself with the microphone, all in extreme closeup. There is a cut back to Jagger (now at the editing table), back to Tina, back to Jagger who comments "It's nice to have a chick occasionally [on the show]."

Taken in its entirety, the scene is the most vicious, demeaning treatment of a person I have ever seen in a documentary. Seen apart from the film Tina Turner's act has a grinding, spine-chilling effect, but the act must be allowed to build in time with all attention riveted on the singer. By cutting Tina Turner off from both the attention and time span she requires, the Maysles have turned her into an obscene caricature. Such juxtaposition not only shows a bad sense of timing, but also a criminal disrespect for the raw material of the film itself—the power of music.

(4) *a bogus sense of perspective.* The editing table sequences in which David Maysles allows Jagger and Watts to comment on film footage does much more than permit a more dramatic chronology to the film. Maysles asks Jagger and Watts, not Belli, Marty Balin, Sam Cutler, Dick Carter or Frisco Pete, to comment on the Altamont footage; the film thereby implies that Jagger and Watts have a special perspective on the event. Yet any

astute viewer of the film knows the opposite is true: the Stones had only a hint of what was actually happening. Jagger was both the instigator and the victim of apocalypse; the singer of "Street Fighting Man" asks helplessly, "Why are we fighting? Who wants to fight?" The movieola sequences imply that both Jagger and Maysles are in a position to creatively reflect on what has happened, yet the film shows neither to be capable of it.

These failed artistic devices suggest that the Maysles sought to bring an organizing aesthetic to the film, yet were unable to successfully bring it under control. The result is a film which employs just enough artistic editorializing to accomplish its limited ends: to be "true" to the superficial reality of a time and place—the ultimate Altamount bummer. The events shown in the film certainly did happen, but the perspective given to them is misleading. *Gimme Shelter* makes dozens of inferences (about Tina Turner, Jagger, Hell's Angels, rock audiences) which simply cannot be taken at face value. In another time and place (and in another Maysles film) their face value might have had meaning, but in *Gimme Shelter* the viewer knows the face value all to well and seeks the lasting value. The shifting aesthetic shifts once too often: one cannot separate the event from the second-rate artistic vision.

The final image of *Gimme Shelter* is not, to my mind, the murder of Meredith Hunter, but the shot of David Maysles explaining to Jagger over the editing table, "This gives us complete freedom. We may only be on you for a minute, and then be somewhere else." *Gimme Shelter* shows the Maysles to be infatuated with what they can do, not concerned with what they must do. Before the concert, *Rolling Stone* reported, Albert Maysles had instructed his cameramen to film only scenes of peacelove, but once the winds of the concert had shifted, the Maysles could just as easily adapt to the newly salable commodity. Images of nubile nudity, grass and serenity turned into a panorama of obese ugliness, bad trips and death. The Maysles yielded effortlessly to the new exploitive necessity. To me it seems no coincidence that the film which finally appeared was only a fulfillment of the already thriving Altamount myth, replacing the outdated Woodstock edition.

There is, of course, a great deal of excellent footage and editing in *Gimme Shelter*: I don't mean to demean individual scenes which have a riveting, morbid fascination. One remembers a pan from the Santana singing "Six Days on the Road" to a brawl already in progress, a Hell's Angel's spiteful stare at Jagger, screams heard above the music, Jagger prancing through chaos, Melvin Belli holding court over a motley collection of cops, farmers and rock entrepreneurs. But, in the end, *Gimme Shelter* remains a film of shallow intentions; its aesthetics seem those of possibility and opportunism rather than necessity and moral commitment. I don't think the Maysles were in any way willfully corrupt; they simply were unable to bring the necessary artistic dimension to a well-known event of major importance. Their already paradoxical aesthetic came to the breaking point; rather than being redeemed by an artistic imperative, the aesthetic was corrupted by superficial possibilities. ★ Paul Schrader

Two-Lane Blacktop

An often overlooked proposition of auteur criticism asserts that the pressures of the studio system led to a tension between a director's *mise-en-scene* and the imposed elements of script, stars, and budget. The case for directors like Nicholas Ray, Joseph H. Lewis, and Phil Karlson is founded upon a notion of visual style rising above genre conventions and studio restrictions. With the now near-complete dissolution of studio controls, the ascendance of the auteur director from the ranks of the studio hacks has given way to the notion of the auteur as the completely independent film-maker expressing his personal vision in an atmosphere of relative freedom.

While Monte Hellman would appear to be a paradigm case of the new auteur, *Two-Lane Blacktop* demonstrates that while the conventions change, the tensions remain. The film, in large measure, is redeemed by Hellman's ability to subvert popular elements into fresh patterns. Hellman's prior reputation rests on his two westerns, *Ride in the Whirlwind* and *The Shooting*, shot back-to-back in 1966. While widely heralded at European festivals, American distribution was bungled and the films have yet to see an American release. *Two-Lane Blacktop* is Hellman's first film since, and while thematically and visually very close to the two westerns, it strongly reflects the changes that American films have undergone in recent years.

The film takes off from the story of two guys (James Taylor and Dennis Wilson) who race a home-built hot rod '55 Chevy. On their way across country, they hook up with a girl (Laurie Bird) and go on looking for cars to race. Several states later, they set up a cross-country race with a GTO (driven by Warren Oates, who's named for his car), the winner supposedly taking possession of the loser's car. The race, however, is continually sidetracked, and ultimately never resolved. Instead, the group's partial interactions are explored, the boys fixing GTO's car for him and entering their car in drag races for money, the girl casually trying to make contact with the boys, and GTO spilling out different versions of his life story to a stream of hitchhikers.

Like the westerns, *Two-Lane Blacktop* is obsessed with forward motion, an on-going push towards uncertain ends by characters driven from within. In *The Shooting*, Gashade (Warren Oates) and Coley (Will Hutchins) are hired by a girl (Millie Perkins) to take her on a journey with an unspecified end which turns out to be a deadly confrontation with Gashade's twin brother. In *Ride in the Whirlwind*, Wes (Jack Nicholson) and Vern (Cameron Mitchell) are running from a pack of vigilantes intent on hanging them after their accidental implication with stagecoach robbers. In *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the bet is no more than an excuse by the characters to move ahead, with larger problems on their minds. In all three films, the reasons for the journeys become lost in the working out of individual fates.

In *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the characters are

dominated by speed, the young for its own seemingly existential sake and the older GTO in the hope of reversing his own advancing years, and all of them for want of anything else to do. Hellman's people exist out of time, without past and future. GTO's conflicting stories of his past never ring true, and the boys never refer to anything prior to the present moment. All talk of the future in the very vaguest of terms, of going off somewhere after winning the race.

The film's treatment of the young people is almost anti-human, in reflection of their own lack of personal forcefulness and subservience to technology. Where characters in the westerns were always consciously dependent upon their horses and on occasion displayed a good deal of attention to them (as in Gashade's concern for the dead horse in *The Shooting*), *Two-Lane Blacktop* is deliberately overbalanced with extended discussions about the most miniscule characteristics of auto performance. Endless conversations between The Driver and The Mechanic while The Girl tries to move the talk into more personal areas occur repeatedly. The script's refusal to give them specific names should not be taken as a gimmick suggesting universality, but as further denial of information that would add to their human appeal.

Oates as GTO almost steals the show. He's the only character with a tragic dimension, as well as a comic one. A long-time Western character actor best remembered for his Peckinpah films, Oates is brilliantly credible as the aging driver who seems out of place in his car, but more out of place anywhere else. With residual (or possibly incipient) playboy characteristics (cassette tapes for any mood, a portable bar in the trunk), GTO's colorful tales, adjusting to his assessment of the listener, are endlessly fascinating. To an old lady he's on his way to Florida to fix up a house for his mother, and at other times he's alternately an ex-test pilot, a location scouter for a racing film, a Detroit test driver, and an ex-TV producer. Oates' personal warmth and colorful control of language ("Color me GONE!" and addressing someone as "shit-for-brains") counterpoint a pathetic gullibility and deep sadness. The screen comes alive every moment he's in the frame.

On the surface, *Two-Lane Blacktop* travels the same road as *Easy Rider*. The bond between the films can be seen in the same iconographic devotion to machines, the West-to-South movement, the third-character warmth of Jack Nicholson and Warren Oates to offset the less vocal anti-hero aspects of the two male youths (Hopper-Fonda and Taylor-Wilson), and even in the cafe clashes with Middle America. Hellman, though, uses these popularized elements, works against them, and subverts them to his own vision. Indeed, the prime virtue of *Two-Lane Blacktop* is its resolute refusal to indulge in the youth film pandering seemingly at the base of the material. Hellman is an auteur in the old sense in this film, dealing with popular conventions on a visual level in a way that will probably disappoint the audience for which the film is intended (and the studio money that no doubt banked upon the film's youth appeal).

Two-Lane Blacktop also intersects with *Five Easy Pieces*, but more favorably. In both films, the rootless characters are seen as