

## *A Conversation with Albert Maysles*

*What are your current projects?*

I am working on several projects. One of them, *In Transit*, is a project about trains, and really about people I traveling on trains in six different parts of the world. I travel on long distance trains in each one of these countries, and I hope to find on each trip, in each one of these countries, at least one person with a story when they get off the train. I film them *on* the train, but then, most importantly, the story when I get *off*. I filmed the story, for example, of a women who is on the train, she had never seen her mother since she was three, and the night before she got a call from a women three hours away by train, saying “I am your mother! On the next train I’ll be waiting for you at the train station...” and I filmed the whole encounter. So it’s an attempt in one film to bring the world together.

*What do you think about the advent of digital technology, its use and proliferation in the everyday life?*

I think digital technology is a wonderful thing and I see it as a very, very positive advance for many reasons. In my website I give 30 reason why I have started to use film and later I moved on to use video: the economy, the fact that you have forty or sixty minutes for each tape instead of the 10 minutes of 16 mm camera magazine. You don’t loose anything, as you are filming you can immediately check out what you just gotten instead of waiting two or three days the film to came back from the laboratory. You can hold the camera off the shoulder, so that your eyes are free to see much more and for the person you are filming to see your face rather than just a big piece of camera equipment. You also do not have to change the type of tape and the type of film according to the lighting conditions and whether you are filming indoor or outdoor and so forth, all these problems are avoided with video.

*Light equipment and synchronous sound first appeared in the early sixties. Technological advances are often mentioned as some of the determinant conditions that favored the birth of direct cinema.*

Exactly. This was another big step in the action of making the documentary filming more a matter of what is going on rather than what are the problems we have in shooting.

*There was also a fruitful debate between you and the simultaneous phenomenon of cinema-vérité in France. Jean Rouch for example in Chronicle on a Summer decided to actively intervene and comment on its own documentary, while you opted to remain an observer. Could you tell me something about your work in the United States and this French style in documentary?*

I think that we have gone through further in the direction of letting the subject and the activity speak for themselves. We want to give the persons who is viewing the film the opportunity to be as close as possible to being actually present to the events recorded, and

to end up to end with seeing something from which they can make up their own minds. When you set the stage, or you interview people, ask questions, you are already limiting the possibility of discovering what's going on, by the tone. You begin to establish instead a kind of...what should I say...*point of view*, that shows control on what's going on. I prefer to go to the extreme of not controlling, but with a sharp eye and with a poetic eye, of discovering what is taking place without knowing that later on. Only later I may decide to use a narrator or a host or music where I feel I can catch the drama. I think those are the points I would make.

*Where does the border between reality and fiction lie? You stated "As a documentarian I happily place my fate and faith in reality" and you often talk about love for your subject. Even Italian neorealists talked about a possible cinematic "truth", the possibility of catching life as it unfolds, portraying stories of working classes and partisans, stories of hope and despair. Do you see any possible parallel?*

The parallel that I am aware perhaps is with Fellini's *La strada*. In fact I had an uncle who was very much the same character as Zampanò in that film. I am only sorry that I was not able as younger person to have filmed him, because I think it would have clearly shown the difference between fiction and non-fiction. A non-fiction film about my uncle would have been just as strong as Anthony Quinn.

*This makes me think that you have often remarked on the importance of the autobiographical element in the work of a documentarist. In Salesman, for example, you follow four door-to-door Bible sellers first making calls in and around Boston, the city where you grew up. In those suggestive sequences I feel that there is a particularly strong empathy with the reality depicted, with those particular houses, those persons, those...geographical coordinates, the places of your childhood.*

I think that something that a documentary filmmaker should keep in mind is that there is a great advantage in the choice of subject matter, and that subject matter have some kind of relation to early experience on the part of the filmmaker. I think that one can be all the more motivated to make the film and all the more insightful if the characters remind one of somebody in the family or some childhood experiences. I think that often time you choose something about which you feel very strongly odd: "Oh, I got to make this film!" and later on you discover that "Oh...it's because something that happened in my childhood!".

*So you often discovered the inner motivation animating your work through the process of making a film and not necessarily before?*

Right, exactly. You may be familiar with another documentary I am currently working on, the Blood Libel film about Mendel Belis [*Scapegoat on Trial*], about anti-Semitism. Many years ago, when I was a child I was told about this and the memory kept cooking in my mind all of my life and then I decided that maybe there's a film, and now I have a very strong motivation to make the film and discover what it's all about.

*In the transition between the 1960s and the 1970s your work becomes closer to high modernism, describing both the reality you were depicting and the artifice though which you were depicting it. One of your most celebrated films, Gimme Shelter, adopts a non-chronological order and a self-reflexive approach to the events. In a crucial meta-documentary sequence, you and your brother bring us into the editing room, repeatedly running the footage of Meredith Hunter's stabbing forward and backward in slow motion in the presence of Mick Jagger.*

Exactly. We realized as we were editing the film that we didn't have the Rolling Stones' reaction to those events, but we also remembered that they had asked at some points if they could see some of the footage. Putting those two together we thought "Ok, we will show them the footage, they did ask for that, and we will film them". So it wasn't something that we had set up really, in a false way, that's what they wanted so we let them have it.

*There is also the debate about the possibility of fully seeing and understanding an event as it develops in front of our eyes...At a certain point in the documentary, the focus shifts away from the performance and more toward the audience.*

Right, and there is also another dimension that comes about when we film them listening to the playback of their music when they were sitting in the recording studio listening to the playback of *Wild Horses*, so we have another level of interpretation.

*Beginning in the 1990s your documentaries seem more concerned about social themes: 1992's Abortion: Desperate Choices; 1996's Letting Go: A Hospice Journey; 2000's Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton.*

Those were all films that I was asked to make. If somebody would had just given me money, then I would have chosen to shoot *In Transit*, which is a film without any special point of view, and without any specific purpose. Even a film like *Salesmen* is without any purpose but at the same time, in a very profound way, it allows one to study the whole social system in American culture. But again, without a point of view, without saying whether it is good or bad.

*In the American visual history, there are some important events that have been almost accidentally captured on film, such as the Kennedy assassination or, more recently, the arrest of Rodney King. What was your reaction in front of these documents and what do you think about the difficulty of establishing a clear narrative to the footage?*

I feel very sad that so many dramatic events that are happening in the world are not documented. Three weeks before the war began in Iraq I wrote a letter to the Pentagon, to the "right person", to ask if I could be allowed to be with some of the soldiers before the invasion and to film some of their conversations, but I never got an answer. But if I had gotten that, I think it would have helped us to give more information about the involvement very early on, before things happened. We are in Iraq because of a lack of information. If the public really knew how stupid the whole war would be it wouldn't

have happened. I have been making a film of the Dalai Lama and I became fascinated with his idea of non-violence. There are examples of successful negotiation without violence, but they are not recorded! We should also have documentary examples of that. Over and over again, so people would understand that they shouldn't meet violence with violence.

*Your work seems to be the fruit of a collective effort and your career includes numerous prestigious collaborations, beginning with Godard back in 1963. How do you work collectively, and what has contributed to the successful collaborations during your career?*

We try to give full credit to those responsible for the filmmaking. So, we give equal credits for the editors, the producers, cinematographers and assistants as well. In that way, I do not do the editing because that is not my best skill, our editors much more skilled in that, while my most important talent is with the camera and my brother David in taking the sound but also in supervising the editing. So, we have a good team of people, each one doing his or her best and also getting credit for it.

*You have kept mentoring the next generation of filmmakers. Is there somebody in particular whose documentary work will be relevant in the future years?*

I don't see that many other people's film. I have helped several filmmakers make films of their own, but I have to really wait longer to see how much progress they make to be able to predict that. I have some strong views about the work of people like Michael Moore, obviously, because he is such a point-of-view person that so much factual material doesn't get into his films, but it should be there. And he also doesn't get very far with people he films because he wants to use them to prove his point, rather than to discover how they really feel.

*In a way his process of working seems almost antithetical to yours.*

Exactly. He has commented for example: "People will do themselves in", and that he doesn't have to push them. Well, is that what you really want? You want people to do themselves in? Is that the purpose? No, you can do better than that.

*You filmed some fascinating material portraying both celebrities like Orson Welles, Truman Capote, Marlon Brando, but even the most anonymous everyday men and women. It seems that you have the gift of creating a mutual trust, to make people feel 'comfortable' in front of the camera.*

I think that even for the first moment when we look at one another, they sense that I am there and that I am going to like them and that I will take the responsibility of telling the truth. I feel confident that I can do that and I *must* do that. And they catch that, just from my behavior. Even as I start filming they'll notice that. "Oh, that's nice! That's good that he got that, he knows what he is doing!" Then it gets better and better. But even the very

first moments I start filming, that material is as good as anything else, because I am so quick to establish a rapport, to get people's access. It is important *how* you look at the person and then they look back at you, and then also how you carry forth by empathizing with the people you are just filming. I keep emphasizing the importance of allowing things to happen and to observe carefully rather than to control, so I think that the most authentic way of filming is to have an open mind that allow things to get course. I think that's the attitude of social sciences and psychology too, otherwise you have your own interruptions that changes the course of the events, and that's not scientific.

*What would you recommend to a documentarist?*

In my website I posted some rules about how to make a documentary. Two or three of the rules that are so important is that you should love your subject and you should film scenes, film events and most important of all film people experiencing something. Those experiences become the experience of the viewer. In *Salesmen*, when Paul's is having a difficult time selling, you really feel what he is going through, as if it were you. This is what is so special that you can do in making a documentary, it's documentary at its strongest, and at its natural expression, most cinematic, filming people experiencing something.

*Finally, a personal curiosity. Your motorbike trip in Russia in the mid 1950s is today surrounded by an almost legendary aura, however, I did not have a chance to see Psychiatry in Russia and Russian close up, because they are not easily available. I also know that your very first film is the only one you edited.*

Of course this was at a time when I didn't know anything and I had a very primitive kind of equipment, a wind up camera that is noisy and could only shoot for three minutes. I had a very limited amount of film and I wasn't able to shoot synch sound or any sound. It was like making a silent film, although later I used narration to explain what was going on. But even so given the instruments that I had I think I did something quite interesting.