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JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, Volume 60, Issue 5, 2021, pp.  
99-120 (Article)

Published by Michigan Publishing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2021.0021>



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# Observational Secular: Religion and Documentary Film in the United States

## ABSTRACT

Documentary addresses religion poorly, and there is no significant documentary film criticism engaging religion. Yet religion has been a subject for documentary film throughout its history. This conjoined declaration—that there are few quality documentaries about religion and no significant film criticism about religion, but religion appears throughout documentary film—is the subject of this article. Focusing on the observational secular of Direct Cinema, the author examines *A Time for Burning* (Bill Jersey and Barbara Connell, 1966), *Holy Ghost People* (Peter Adair, 1967), and *Salesman* (David Maysles, Albert Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin, 1969) as constructive examples of religion in documentary.

The documentary impetus transforms the unacknowledged questions that lie beneath all nonfictional forms into potential subject matter: that is, on what basis does the spectator invest belief in the representation, what are the codes which ensure that belief, what material processes are involved in the production of this “spectacle of the real” and to what extent are these processes to be rendered visible or knowable to the spectator?

—MICHAEL RENOV, DOCUMENTARY THEORIST<sup>1</sup>

While the reformist structure of the Enlightenment had mounted a polemic against the divisive meaning of religion in Western

<sup>1</sup> Michael Renov, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 31.

Kathryn Lofton, “Observational Secular: Religion and Documentary Film in the United States,” *JCMS* 60, no. 5 (2020–2021): 99–120.

culture and set forth alternate meanings for the understanding of the human, the same ideological structures through various intellectual strategies paved the ground for historical evolutionary thinking, racial theories, and forms of color symbolism that made the economic and military conquest of various cultures and peoples justifiable and defensible. In this movement both religion and cultures and peoples throughout the world were created anew through academic disciplinary orientations—they were signified.

—CHARLES LONG, HISTORIAN OF RELIGION<sup>2</sup>

I have a terrible feeling against preachers since I think you're responsible for the problem in the first place. And for you this may be an excursion across the line.

—ERNE CHAMBERS, CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST<sup>3</sup>

Documentary film addresses religion poorly, and there is little significant documentary film criticism that engages with religion.<sup>4</sup> Yet religion has been a significant subject for documentary film throughout its history. This conjoined declaration—that there are few quality documentaries about religion and no significant film criticism about religion, but religion is determining of documentary film—is the subject of this article. Documentary film historians do not acknowledge religion as a substantive subject, and documentary filmmakers have a vexed record of its capture.<sup>5</sup> In this silence and these stumbles, historians continue the modernist impulse defined by religion's denial, and filmmakers maintain its documentary persistence as a form of signified other. Looking at the kinds of visibility afforded religion in documentary offers a view into the secularizing work of nonfictional thinking of which documentary is but one emblematic genre.

2 Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 4.

3 Quotation from Ernie Chambers in *A Time for Burning* (William Jersey and Barbara Connell, Quest Productions, 1966).

4 Here I concur with Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow when they observe, "Religion has almost never been a topic in any visible evidence conference (with exceptions, of course), and to date no book addresses it head on with regard to documentary." Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, introduction to "Religion," in *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 337. The three subsequent chapters included in the Blackwell companion address documentaries about religion outside of the United States. Within the fields of film studies and documentary studies, no scholarship on religion and US documentary exists. The one exception to this is Judith Weisenfeld, "Race, Religion, and Documentary Film," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History*, ed. Paul Harvey and Kathryn Gin Lum (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Weisenfeld's path-clearing work demonstrates how early documentary film reflected and produced ideas about the relationship between religion and race and how representations of religion and race helped to support the authority of the documentary as a form understood to be axiomatically truthful and educational.

5 The latter claim is a normative one, the former a bibliographic description: the silence on religion in documentary film in film and media studies is striking because religion is a frequent topic of documentary films. Outside of Weisenfeld's work, however, there has been little work on religion as a topic in documentary film and none on religion as a topic in US documentary film.

This article explores the visibility of religion within documentary film through the analysis of three films from a particular epoch of documentary, observational or Direct Cinema, and the observational secular this movement advocated to achieve. This work is critical and constructive, seeking to evaluate preceding documentary attention and encourage better documentary artistic and critical acuity in the future. Trinh T. Minh-ha and Fatimah Tobing Rony have articulated well the political infrastructure of the documentary genre, underlining the racialized legacies of colonial exploration in documentary production in which the salvaging of “culture” served as an imperative inaugural force.<sup>6</sup> To this appraisal, I add the complicit religiosity of this documentary impulse to observe and educate. By “religiosity,” I do not mean to identify a specific denomination or sect whose cosmologies influence a filmmaker’s decisions, although this information can contribute to the interpretation of religion. Rather, the religiosity of documentary is in its inherent humanism—what Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow have called its “intent on changing the world.”<sup>7</sup> Making documentaries and viewing documentaries have long been components of a broad pedagogical mission to raise awareness and encourage the tolerance of difference through the exposure of what is assumed to be, or is being rendered to be, unknown, mysterious, strange, and other.

In reference to the mid-twentieth-century US film archive of Direct Cinema, I argue that this humanism is indistinguishable from a performance of secular politics in which the documentarian is cast as the nonsectarian broker of subjects imagined to be less neutral than the filmmaker because the filmed subjects are sectarian—Catholic, Pentecostal, Lutheran. The making of documentary has frequently—but not exclusively—been a component to the broader aesthetics of control in which religion is something to be contained, rendering documentary itself an articulation of secular freedom. If one casts the documentarian as someone exploring subterranean spaces, traversing borders, and transgressing intimate boundaries, that figure emerges as the ultimate cosmopolite for whom religious life would be a contradictory piece of prejudicing baggage. If the critic or scholar understands the documentary director as necessarily secular, the resultant documentaries they make are secularizing, insofar as the documentary is often a viewing assignment imagined to be a pathway to assimilating into a plural society with compassion and intercultural understanding.

Assigning the word “secular” to documentary acknowledges its longstanding journalistic role in the public sphere while underlining the ideological, even homiletic, hope for such nonfictional persuasion. Like ethnographic writing and the postcolonial novel as described by Johannes Fabian and Benedict Anderson, documentaries produce a political ideology of hierarchical relations in and through the occupation of a cosmopolitan sec-

6 Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

7 Juhasz and Lebow, introduction to “Religion,” 340.

ular genre.<sup>8</sup> Naming the documentary as not just colonial in its anthropological origins but also secular in its educational purpose allows us to see more clearly its ideological valence. In the specific history of religion and its discursive operations in the United States, the secular is not an absence of religion but a series of contested and competing claims to religious authority. As many recent scholars of religion have demonstrated, the secular describes a context in which certain kinds of religions, certain ways of *being* religious, are preferred and protected while others are stigmatized and prohibited by law and social expectation. More often than not, in the United States, the forms of religion that jurisprudence and etiquette secure are those that submit to the norms of speech and act of White Christianity after the Reformation.<sup>9</sup>

For those outside of religious studies, it is sometimes hard to move from seeing the secular as a space of nonreligion or irreligion to seeing it as a tool for adjudicating competing ideas about religion. In the twentieth century, references to the secular usually meant allusions to the state's religious disestablishment. What post-9/11 studies of the secular have worked to expose is how this absence of official state religious authority does not diminish religious vibrancy among the people or claims to religious authority within and by the state. If anything—as, again, the robust sectarianism of the United States suggests—disestablishment increases the competitive social sphere for religion. Most scholars of religion now agree: the secular is not the absence of the sacred as much as it is a reterritorializing of what *is* sacred.<sup>10</sup> In this article, the word “secular” should be associated not with irreligion but rather with control over absence or presence or presence of religion.

Here I introduce a complicated category, the secular, into documentary studies, suggesting it is an imperative category to comprehend the ideology of its nonfictional pretense and aesthetic power. “If ever there is a set of filmic practices that contradict the spiritual side of life, it would be those associated with documentary,” Juhasz and Lebow suggest. “But like all general claims made about the documentary, this omits important contributions to the practice of documentary that challenge its range and scope.”<sup>11</sup> Documentary is not spiritual, these scholars note, but this doesn't mean that its nonfictional forms don't supply spiritual or religious power. Consider a recent survey of documentary directors by the British Film Institute's *Sight & Sound* magazine, which lists among its top ten documentaries the films *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), *Shoah* (Claude

8 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), chaps. 1 and 3; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), chap. 2.

9 Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

10 For key works in the study of the secular, see Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 52–77; Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); and John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

11 Juhasz and Lebow, introduction to “Religion,” 338.

Lanzmann, 1985), *Night and Fog* (Alain Resnais, 1956), and *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988).<sup>12</sup> Watching these films, you will see nothing that the regular viewer might catalog as religion. Nobody prays; the camera does not linger on temple edifices; the subjects of the films say little about God. However, for admirers of these films, it seems strange not to use words like “sacred” or “sublime” as they describe these films’ accomplishments. Two of these films address the Holocaust, all meditate in some way on the spiritual effects of trauma, and one offers a ramble in a mechanized urbanity in which ethical inquiries abound. Insofar as these movies ask where modern subjects sit in the universe, and under what material constraints and with what existential opportunities, the concept of religion seems useful to get at the existential bigness of what these films do, even as there is no minutiae of religious life on display.<sup>13</sup> These films are not depictions of spiritual life, but in their secular sight, they are not without spiritual meaning to their directors or viewers.

When documentary more overtly addresses religion, such sublimity transfigures to work either more sentimental or more hectoring than the classic works just cited. The vast majority of documentary films addressing religion do not offer accounts of religious lives that are generously disposed. Their entertainments exist on the grounds of spectacularizing the religious. Spectacularizing in how the films show some aspect of religion brainwashing its followers, or how invariably self-contradictory religious belief is, or how proximate piety is to mental illness or sexual sublimation. Religion in documentary film is rarely a site of individual or social complexity or ingenuity. Rather, documentary films in the United States such as those often produced by National Geographic celebrate the splendor of religion, or documentary films try to explain the experience of conservative American Christianity, such as in *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* (Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, 2000), *Hell House* (George Ratliff, 2001), or *Jesus Camp* (Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, 2006). Whether one views debunking treatments of religion such as *Religulous* (Larry Charles, 2008) or investigative treatments of religion such as *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (Alex Gibney, 2015) or *8: The Mormon Proposition* (Reed Cowan and Steven Greenstreet, 2010), the verdict on religion in documentary film is the same. Documentary film on religion condemns religion as an overbearing source of anti-intellectual sensory wonder or social control. According to Brian Winston, the “tradition of the victim” suffuses documentary filmmaking from the late-nineteenth-century capture of exotic subjects in salvage ethnography to the depiction of human beings as social problems in *The March of Time* (Time Inc., 1935–1951) news-

12 “Filmmakers’ Greatest Documentaries of All Time,” BFI.org, April 25, 2019, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/sight-sound-magazine/filmmakers-greatest-docs>.

13 Juhasz and Lebow observe that the films of Werner Herzog particularly invite discussions of “ecstasy, sublimity, truth” as components to the “documentary pursuit.” Juhasz and Lebow, introduction to “Religion,” 338. In his work on religion and film, S. Brent Plate considers *Man with a Movie Camera* for its spatial elements and their formal relationship to ritual. S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), chap. 2.

reels.<sup>14</sup> We could decide that religion is just another subject in that documentary tradition of victimhood.<sup>15</sup>

This would be a mistake. Like any nonfictional genre, the documentary form can be deployed to better and worse realizations of its educational imperative. As Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz have argued, the term “observational cinema” designated a media formation that included a wide variety of films whose production worked overtly to break from earlier anthropological approaches toward the recording of social and cultural practice.<sup>16</sup> Taking up the secular in observational documentary—and marking it as the observational secular—allows us to see what hermeneutic good can exist in documentary film considering religion. The emergence of observational documentary encouraged filmmakers and critics alike to consider reflexivity in the relationship between filmmaker and filmed. During the heyday of observational cinema, nonfiction was itself a highly contested cultural form, and observational documentary contributed to querying what mediated truth can exist. Three Direct Cinema films about religion—*A Time for Burning* (Bill Jersey and Barbara Connell, 1966), *Holy Ghost People* (Peter Adair, 1967), and *Salesman* (David Maysles, Albert Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin, 1969)—offered religion not as a subject in opposition to the self-proclaimed secular of the filmmakers but as a form of interpersonal reckoning and intimacy. As will be conveyed in their own voices, Direct Cinema documentarians strive for a relational performance of neutrality. This is what I will call the observational secular, namely the effort by filmmakers to set themselves in the middle of relationships defined by religion and use their cameras and editing to depict what comprises those relational forces without deciding on a side to take.

As I researched these individual Direct Cinema filmmakers, I found in every directorial case an overwhelming verbosity about their formal, and expressly *irreligious*, ambitions as documentarians. Their repeated references to their neutrality toward their subjects were simultaneous with their disavowals of religion. The latter is, of course, a contradiction of the former: one cannot be neutral toward that which one ardently claims not to be. Denying religion is still a relationship to religion. Even more, in this instance, we find that in this space of fierce neutrality, the filmmakers are not quiet about what

14 Brian Winston, “The Tradition of the Victim in Griersonian Documentary,” in *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television*, ed. Larry P. Gross, John Stuart Katz, and Jay Ruby (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 34–57.

15 A reviewer identified documentary films that they suggest depict religion better than this indictment suggests. These include *Satya: A Prayer for the Enemy* (Ellen Bruno, 1992), *Chasing Buddha* (Amiel Courtin-Wilson, 2000), *Trembling Before G-d* (Sandi Simcha DuBowski, 2001), *The Smith Family* (Tasha Oldham, 2002), and *Love Free or Die* (Macky Alston, 2012). I think this reviewer watches these films and sees the dignity and moral courage of their lead figures: Kim, the betrayed matriarch of the Smith family; the queer figures struggling to reconcile their sexuality with their Judaism; or Mark, Gene Robinson’s devoted partner in his battle with the Episcopal Church. I watch these films and see how these characters battle religions or states oppressing their freedom; oppression is the inescapable thematic companion to religion’s depiction. The main characters become surrogates for the filmmaker, a heroic seer of secular truth amid confounded unreason.

16 Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

they prefer to be or do; they had rules. Whatever success or failure Direct Cinema was, it had many of the components of a new sect, including doctrine, commandments, charismatic leadership, and a significant following. As archival records consistently show, vérité documentarians intended to do something different with their human subjects than what had been done before. They did not want to idealize human subjects as congruent icons or potential heroes; they also did not debunk their subjects, seeking hypocrisy in their choices. Instead, they sought to find the humanity that emerges through everyday acts of relational interpretation and reconciliation. This often leaves the edges of the films, and the subjects, more ragged than romantic and the films more boring than dramatic.<sup>17</sup>

In his definition of documentary, philosopher and communication studies scholar Carl Plantinga says that a grounding principle for documentary is that the filmmakers must “take an attitude of belief toward relevant propositional content.”<sup>18</sup> Returning to these filmmakers and these particular films exposes something else. For observational filmmakers of the 1960s, the effort was to capture resistance and presence. Talking about this ambition led to grandiloquent claims, such as by Albert Maysles: “I think the most essential element in my work is my love for people and my understanding of people and the success that I have in understanding them through my work. You see it on the screen. It’s a hard relationship I have with the people I am filming . . . they pick up on my empathizing. . . . Anyone watching one of my films should have no difficulty getting very close to the people on the screen and I think become all the better person for having had that experience.”<sup>19</sup> I do not claim that the Direct Cinema films on which I focus achieve their stated relational objectives. Instead, I contend that one can see in these films an effort to depict the recording gaze as a relationship for the filmed to engage. Arguing that these films achieve an observational secular that reckons with the camera’s objectification, this article concludes with recommendations for future work in the study of religion and documentary film.

### **OBSERVATIONAL SECULAR, 1966–1968**

Documentarians have stigmatized or erased religious subjectivity in ways related to, but not perfectly isomorphic with, the pedagogical role of race in documentary film. Stephen Charbonneau argues that the history of documentary film is indistinguishable from the representation of racial otherness, since its genre origins date to nineteenth-century efforts to integrate

17 “Unfortunately, it continues true that the only way to suggest tedium is tedium, and *Salesman* is almost unsittably tedious,” argued Charles Champlin in “‘Fifth Street’ and ‘Salesman’ to Open Run,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1969. For a film review that again conveys this sense of an unexciting result to good documentary ethics, see Ernest Callenbach, review of *Salesman*, *Film Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (Autumn 1969): 54–55.

18 Carl Plantinga, “What a Documentary Is, After All,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 114.

19 Quotation from *Academy Visual History* with Albert Maysles, recorded in Harlem, New York, with interviewer Sienna McLean LoGreco (October 4, 2013). This is the edited, public version of the visual history interview with Albert Maysles, which Maysles has viewed and approved for public access. Available at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Film Archive.



filmmaking into anthropological excursions. It is also difficult to disentangle race from the documentary film's broader liberal tendency to train citizens, promote social pedagogy, and, to some extent, manage the excesses of modern life in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> The subject of religion in twentieth-century documentary film is similar in its position relative to race: documentary exists as a context for teaching the public about something presumed to be *other than that public*.

Writing about World War II newsreels, Sumiko Higashi describes how the "voice of God" narration in Paramount News continued in the rational investigative tradition of the interwar American urban reporter, "while its moral exhortation, rendering ideology more transparent, expressed a Manichaeian view of the cosmos."<sup>21</sup> Postwar educational movies lightened a bit on its wartime rhetoric, but the moralizing narrative remained. Documentary film, especially in its relationship to educational film, has always had an inferred needful viewer who requires the humanistic education documentary provides. Historians have explained how American infrastructure for the use of educational films grew exponentially after World War II as a feature of Cold War efforts to program civic identity.<sup>22</sup> Documentary played a critical role in establishing the impression of American democratic society as tolerant, not only through its depictions of America as a civic ideal but also—through their distribution and screenings—making a common civic space for Americans to learn how to be American. Higashi suggests that as postwar America became increasingly less churchgoing and ostensibly secularized, the "moral polarity of a melodramatic world of absolutes . . . served the rhetorical purposes of discourse on the 'Other.'"<sup>23</sup> As fewer people attended actual churches, the gospel of the nation, depicted in educational films, emerged as a ritual commons.

Beginning in the late 1950s, Direct Cinema sought to resist the moralizing sentimentality of postwar documentary realism, especially manifest in the use of somnambulant narrators, sit-down interviews, and static compositions. The filmmakers associated with these movements, known as Direct Cinema in the United States and Canada, *cinéma vérité* in France, and, slightly later, Free Cinema or observational documentary in Britain, shared certain aesthetic conventions, including the rejection of carefully scripted cinema. Filmmakers associated with these schools seemed unconcerned if their images were grainy and wobbly or went out of focus. This rougher

20 Stephen Charbonneau, *Projecting Race: Postwar America, Civil Rights, and Documentary Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 19.

21 Sumiko Higashi, "Melodrama, Realism, and Race: World War II Newsreels and Propaganda Film," *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 39.

22 Lisa M. Rabin, "A Social History of U.S. Educational Documentary: The Travels of Three Shorts, 1945–1958," *Film History* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 2. Despite resisting the narrativizing impulse of postwar educational film, many films from the Direct Cinema movement contributed to the same Cold War political project, advocating for the linked power of capitalism and democracy to improve individual lives at home and abroad. Many of the techniques of *cinéma vérité*—a "technique that constitutes a kind of domestic spying," as Jonathan Kahana writes—were the direct result of the military use of such equipment in World War II. Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 13.

23 Higashi, "Melodrama, Realism, and Race," 41.

look became an aesthetic signifying the “real” of what they recorded.<sup>24</sup> The films also emphasized indirect address rather than individuals speaking directly to the camera, thereby minimizing the viewer’s sense that the onscreen figures acted conscientiously, in light of the filmmakers’ presence, and placing the viewer in between the on-camera speakers. Films further conveyed this sense of the noninvasive filmmaker through long takes, synchronous sound, and the eschewal of voice-over narration. “The virtue of the long take,” said Albert Maysles, a leading artist in Direct Cinema, “is that it involves necessarily less artificiality. The artificiality of the author-editor is thrown out for the duration of the take. The viewer is put in the driver’s seat: the continuity that he selects from gives him a feeling of really knowing exactly what’s happening.”<sup>25</sup> Resulting films tended toward spatio-temporal continuity rather than montage, invoking the feeling of a perpetual “present tense” to the recorded proceedings.<sup>26</sup>

In her brilliant reading of *Primary* (Robert Drew, 1960), Jeanne Hall suggests that cinéma vérité may be defined as a style that is specifically interested in examining the nature of persuasion.<sup>27</sup> For some critics the self-importance of vérité directors, as well as subsequent debates about how “truthful” their realism was, undermines the power of this stylistic genre. Hall rejects these debates over the *veritas* (truth) of cinéma vérité, asking instead that we focus on how these films help us think about documentary as a form of textual criticism about persuasion. Breaking down the editorial work in *Primary*, Hall argues that as a comment on ideology and argument, the film exposes how the vérité documentarian isn’t producing truth but illustrating how the documentary is produced to be read *as* truth.

Adding to Hall’s significant insight about how cinéma vérité comments on the editing process, I suggest that *A Time for Burning*, *Holy Ghost People*, and *Salesman* each render their subjects participants in the formation of the secular attention given to them. When I point to the observational secular in these three films, I am trying to describe the relationship between the documentarians’ attitudes toward their films’ formal qualities and the aims and focus of their documentary looking. These films focus on the space *between*: between human beings, between filmmaker and subject, and between named ideals and lived practices. Reading *Primary*, Hall asks us to think about how vérité aesthetics—grainy, wobbly, occasionally out-of-focus images; indirect address; long takes; synchronous sound; and spatiotemporal continuity—reflect an attempt to represent the editorial process of assemblage. I suggest that these same aesthetics are likewise emblematic of the relational tech-

24 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 174–176.

25 “Interview: Albert Maysles and David Maysles; Friday, the 31st of March, 1967,” David Maysles Papers (hereafter cited as DMP), box 2, folder 10, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, 13.

26 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 38–44. Several technical innovations in filmmaking, including handheld cameras, the portable sound recorder, tuning fork control, and sound camera synchronization, contributed to this development of the movement.

27 Jeanne Hall, “Realism as a Style in Cinema Verite: A Critical Analysis of *Primary*,” *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 24–50.

niques they show, including the hesitations of racial and religious reconciliation, the queer possibilities for public intimacy, and the hardship of professional failure. The roughened forms of Direct Cinema express the serrated edges of interpersonal life, of political life, of economic survival. That they do so in and through religion is not random but appropriate, since religion is a structure of relational life, between self and other, self and deity, self and institutional systems of rule and authority.

Advocates for Direct Cinema believed that their films allowed greater freedom of interpretation on the part of the viewer, because the filmmaker pulled back their role as arbiter, editor, or moralizer and let the scene they observed play out.<sup>28</sup> Its documentarian leaders stressed an empathetic, nonjudgmental, participatory mode of observation that attenuated the authoritative posture of traditional documentary narrative exposition and control.<sup>29</sup> Robert Drew, producer of *Primary*, conveyed this position: “The film maker’s personality is in no way directly involved in directing the action.”<sup>30</sup> Descriptions of Direct Cinema repeat this promise that it “conveys a sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world” and that “this quality of observation-without-intervention became one of the key claims of its truth-value.”<sup>31</sup> This sense of being “unmediated” was the editorial craft of the filmmaker, and it is in this work of rendering the space of the viewer as one of all-access intimacy that we find something better for religion’s perception. The observational filmmaking movement was an explicit reformation of documentary to improve upon its didacticism and legacy of colonial anthropology.<sup>32</sup>

Influenced by postwar independence movements in Asia and Africa, observational filmmakers understood themselves as replying to the problem of colonial control by locating themselves differently toward the subjects, in a way that closed the interpretive gap. As Albert Maysles explained, “in this case, [the] filming technique, consists of letting it happen. . . . Then, when it begins to turn off a little bit, without even saying anything, you can pull it back in. It’s that subtle sort of thing.”<sup>33</sup> Like many sectarian reformers before

28 Plantinga, “What a Documentary Is,” 109.

29 Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 42.

30 Brian Winston, “The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription,” in Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, 43.

31 Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 43; and Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 177.

32 Often to the purpose of serving social problems. See Stephen Mamber, “Cinéma Vérité and Social Concerns,” *Film Comment* (Nov/Dec 1973): 9, 6. A historical illustration of this is the fact that *Salesman* made its debut at Manhattan’s 68th Street Playhouse on April 18, 1969, with a gala premiere for the benefit of the Cesar Chavez grape workers union, United Farm Workers. For its viewers and its filmmakers, an alliance between progressive causes and Direct Cinema was axiomatic. Yet it’s worth underlining that documentary historians would not catalog the films examined in this article as social documentary, that is, films (often connected to public media) that documented injustices and worked to advance minority rights at home and third world liberation struggles abroad. While many of the filmmakers who produced social documentaries drew on Direct Cinema techniques, their films had different aims. Each of the filmmakers profiled here understood themselves as artists first and activists or journalists second, whereas social documentarians prioritized the activist journalism of their efforts.

33 “J” interviews Albert Maysles, “Manuscripts: Interviews of DM + AM, complete 2-part transcript,” DMP, box 2, folder 7, 18. DMP does not identify “J.”

them, they quickly codified, and disagreed about, rules for the right and wrong ways to make documentaries.<sup>34</sup> “Paradoxically, the film-making movement which seemed to stand for iconoclasm and freedom became one of the most codified and puritanical.”<sup>35</sup> Students of religion will be unsurprised that an effort to purify and democratize a particular field—here, documentary film—led to new forms of chauvinism and control. Filmmakers in this idiom thought that what they did was truer than preceding anthropological or educational films, because they did not judge what they witnessed but instead sought to observe the relationships people had with one another and how relationships and choices were never all bad or all good.<sup>36</sup> The conscientiousness of Direct Cinema did not produce perfect films, but it did offer forms of secular observance indicative of the capacities for documentary to find its footing in the subject religion. Let us turn to three instances of Direct Cinema’s observational secular to watch it at work.

### **A TIME FOR BURNING**

This 1966 film records the efforts of L. William Youngdahl, the ingenuous pastor of a White Lutheran church in Omaha, Nebraska, to initiate an exchange between his church and neighboring all-Black churches. Segregationists within his church oppose the plan, and they force the pastor to resign. The plot of this film is this simple: an overly earnest White man asks his White flock to do something they are still too racist to do, and he loses his job for it. The climactic event of the film transpires offstage. In a proximate experiment at a nearby high school, a teacher encourages White high school students to visit a Black congregation and a group of Black high school students to visit a White Lutheran church. The White students visit the Black congregation without incident. After the Black high school students make their visit, members of the White Lutheran congregation threaten to quit the church if it becomes a regular occurrence. Church leaders see this as a dangerous portend if any further racial exchanges take place.

The two most prominent figures in the film are Youngdahl, the earnest White pastor, and Ernie Chambers, a brilliant, Black atheist community leader.<sup>37</sup> Aside from their regular onscreen appearances, the film primarily listens into conversations among churchmen and laity as they wrestle with the idea of integration in a moment of national civil rights conversation. The majority of the film focuses on White and Black Christians talking about the idea of exchange and the upset after the student visits to the churches. There are some interior shots of church services, but mainly we see churchmen

34 The Maysles brothers engaged in an extended discussion about their rules for documentary film in “Interview: Albert Maysles and David Maysles; Friday, the 31st of March, 1967,” DMP, box 2, folder 10, 7–12.

35 Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins, *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 250.

36 Michael Fox, “Albert Maysles: The Discerning Eye,” program for the 27th Annual Mill Valley Film Festival (2004), 54. Located in the Albert Maysles file at the Margaret Herrick Library.

37 Chambers would go on to become one of the most prominent local politicians in Nebraska and one of the most radical legislators in public office in the United States. See Tekla Agbala Ali Johnson, *Free Radical: Ernest Chambers, Black Power, and the Politics of Race* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2016).

talking in church offices or meeting in church basements or students talking in what appears to be some sort of club. There are many good one-liners. There are no hugs, no handshakes, and no happy resolutions between the disconnected parties; instead, the film depicts many awkward, failed efforts at relational connection in service of racial and religious reconciliation.

The film has denominational origins. Lutheran Film Associates, a media company established in 1952 as a joint venture between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, was assigned to produce a film that would address the era’s radical social and political shifts and offer guidance to church members wrestling with these changes. The company’s executive secretary, Robert E. A. Lee, then commissioned Quest Productions and its producer, Bill Jersey, to make the film.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the history of Christianity, churches have found ways to educate their parishioners on social issues through these kinds of educational media, whether through tract societies, broadcasting networks, or the embrace of film, television, and documentary film as a genre useful for missionary conveyance. Educated at the evangelical Christian colleges Houghton College in New York and Wheaton College in Illinois, Jersey made the film with a strong cultural understanding of White American Christianity, despite considering himself to be a humanist, not a Christian, by this time.<sup>39</sup>

By his own testimony, Jersey saw more reason in Chambers’s political resistance than in Youngdahl’s hopeful piety, mainly because Chambers’s arguments proved true: “If you listen and try to do something,” Chambers says to Youngdahl, “you’ll get kicked out of your church. That’s the way your people are.” At the beginning of the film, and before the students visited the congregations, Chambers explains to him, “You did not gain control of the world like you have it now by dealing fairly with men, keeping your word. You’re treaty breakers; you’re liars; you’re thieves; you rape entire continents and races of people then you wonder why these very people don’t have any confidence or trust in you. Your religion means nothing.” Chambers tells Youngdahl that his Jesus is “contaminated” and that he is wary of engaging him, however well-meaning the pastor may intend to be. “I have a terrible feeling against preachers since I think you’re responsible for the problem in the first place,” Chambers says. “And for you this may be an excursion across the line.” When he leans into his enunciation of excursion, into the second syllable, the meaning is clear: he will not be anyone’s experience. He refuses to be an ethnographic subject like Nanook in *Nanook of the North* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1922), and he won’t let the Black people of Omaha be Youngdahl’s anthropological encounter. Chambers is not going to help a White man get what he needs to feel better about anti-Black systems of injustice with which he is complicit.

The film is memorable because it unblinkingly exposes how arguments for civility produce racist systems. Not a single figure goes on record in the film articulating racist sentiment as such. Yet the majority of White speakers

38 Bill Jersey, director’s commentary, *A Time for Burning* (Lutheran Film Associates, 2005), DVD.

39 Bill Jersey, e-mail correspondence with the author, March 7, 2019.

repeatedly insist that it is not the right time to engage with Black people through the church. They are anxious about property values; they are anxious about diminishing numbers in the pews. They wonder why Youngdahl has chosen this social issue rather than another. “Why pick this one?” a White leader asks. “Why be so revolutionary?” Although a few voices in the White church resist such calls (“If we don’t start now as a church, the world is going to pass us by,” says one), the overwhelming majority articulate a fear of the mimetic effects of any appearance of integration. This description might suggest that the film focuses on White voices, when the primary cinematic reversal it makes—reversal relative to the history of colonial ethnography that preceded it—is to make Black voices the organizing authorities of the film. Although Youngdahl’s face is the first one seen on camera, the first voice heard is a Black male student speaking about the universality of prejudice, then a Black woman resisting his assertion. Through the film, argument never achieves resolution. There is less action than reaction to occurrences offscreen and the anticipation of potential occurrences. The editing of the film fades in and out of discussions, suggesting that part of the problem in social change isn’t silence as much as it is indecisive positioning. The film concludes with images of White and Black churchgoers worshipping separately, reflecting a sociological fact of American Christianity that has few exceptions.

As a depiction of religion, *A Time for Burning* is unique in its effort to expose simultaneously liberal and conservative views within a religious tradition and in its depictions of critique of a religious tradition as internal to the occupation of a religious world. The film practices an observational secular in the way it nestles into religion as a relational practice of interpretation. Although Jersey is clearly a fan of Chambers—a fact the filmmaker reiterated in interviews over the next five decades—he offers a disciplined account of everyone’s viewpoint in the documentary, and he avoids turning Black spirituality into a romantic good or White spirituality into a racist tool of power. Everyone, Christian and not, communicates their beliefs: to other Christians, to other community members, and to the camera. Jersey focuses not on landscapes or physical environment, honing instead on dialogue and close-up shots of faces as they speak. This is a depiction of a very real history of racial and religious reconciliation in its hesitant movements, intense discussions, and ultimate failures. Youngdahl preaches from the pulpit, “I think the Christian community has a great opportunity today to help change the climate.” Some in the crowd nod. When he asks if there is any hope for reconciliation, Chambers says no. This doesn’t stop Youngdahl from continuing to work, and it doesn’t stop many Christians, White and Black, from continuing to debate. In the discussion among Black students, a woman says, “the people make up the church and not the other way around,” and one of the reasons *A Time for Burning* is such a successful depiction of religion is that it holds true to this vision. There is no hegemonic power or blind devotion. There are simply people, debating and deciding what to resist and what to maintain.

## HOLY GHOST PEOPLE

The premise of the 1967 documentary *Holy Ghost People* could hardly be anything other than exploitative: a filmmaker with self-professed atheist views goes to the mountains of West Virginia and watches a Pentecostal service that includes snake handling. Because serpent handling occurs primarily in the Appalachian South, popular coverage of snake handling constructs its handlers “as exotic, bizarre, and grotesque denizens of a southern nether world, as a trivial sideshow spectacle beyond the ken of humanity.”<sup>40</sup> Historian of religions Robert Orsi echoes this sentiment, arguing that people are simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by individuals who, in the case of serpent handling, “‘do forbidden things with their bodies’ and, in doing so, claim intimate access to transcendent power.”<sup>41</sup> *Holy Ghost People* fulfills these worries, partaking, in nonfiction form, of the realistic traditions of Southern Gothic fiction.<sup>42</sup> Is this all it does? A closer look at the film, as well as the filmmaker’s own legacy, suggests that the film is not only offering depictions of the other or the bizarre but also capturing relational intimacy.

The film does traffic in many primitive tropes. The opening voice-over in the film establishes these religious people as hidden in the backwoods (“thousands are scattered among the hills”) and in possession of beliefs that lead them to speak in tongues, drink strychnine, and handle snakes as a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The camera’s view as we hear this explanation is that from a driver’s side of a car, careening through mountain communities that seem abandoned. After the introduction, we see two unnamed men and two unnamed women in a series of monologues, describing how they first got the Holy Ghost. They speak in detailed, looping ways, unhurried and easy in the story. Viewers familiar with the Pentecostal tradition can see these are testimonies that have likely been said before, spoken in church services as testimonies of their ties to the faith.

After the monologues, there is a jump in style, from individual speeches to an exterior nighttime shot. We see cars pull up, headlights bright and almost blinding to the viewer; the adults and children from the cars enter a nondescript building. The preacher begins, “I believe it’s time we should start the service. And we want everybody here that’s got the Holy Ghost to get in the service, put something in the service. And if you haven’t got the Holy Ghost, come and seek the Lord and get it, ‘cause you need it.” Aside from the main preacher, we do not hear the people during the service. We do not hear their chatter, gossip, or prayers. They are bodies and murmurs, tambourines shaking and hands in the air. The subjects are White, but the filmmaker casts their lives in shadows and darkness.

40 Jim Birkhead, “Reading ‘Snake Handling’: Critical Reflections,” in *Anthropology of Religion: A Handbook*, ed. Stephen D. Glazier (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), 20.

41 Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 182; see also Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand, “The Appalachian ‘Other’: Academic Approaches to the Study of Serpent-Handling Sects,” *Religion Compass* 10, no. 3 (2016): 48.

42 Peggy Dunn Bailey, “Coming Home to Scrabble Creek: Saving Grace, Serpent Handling, and the Realistic Southern Gothic,” *Appalachian Journal* 38, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 424.

Reviewers at the time loved the film. In *Film Quarterly*, Ernest Callenbach wrote, “the film follows the very informal procedures in a cool, descriptive, ethnographic way. There is no condescension and no phoney [*sic*] explanation in the film; it simply presents these remarkable people to us.”<sup>43</sup> Folklorist William Clements said, “*Holy Ghost People* . . . avoids sensational treatment of snake-handling by placing the ritual in its worship context.”<sup>44</sup> And Margaret Mead extolled, “The audience, whether a sophisticated audience of specialists or a mixed group of students, becomes completely entranced, as opposed to ‘in trance,’ and emerges from viewing the film ready for new levels of discussion of the realities of religious experience.”<sup>45</sup> The summary reaction was that *Holy Ghost People* achieved the goal of observational film, letting events unfold and thereby giving viewers access to a whole world of experience.<sup>46</sup> Contemporary scholars might see the film as a reductionist rendering of the religious subject rather than a quality interpretation of religious lives. In addition, robust studies of the secular thoroughly contest Mead’s distinction between a secular audience that can be entranced but not deceived, available to be enthralled but still able to wake up and discern “realities.”<sup>47</sup> Whatever positive words the contemporaneous reviews offer, they still distinguish between the film’s subjects and the audience, the former who were understood to be religious and the latter who were not. Such presumptions—that the people in the film couldn’t be in its eventual audience and that the audience, though enthralled, wouldn’t ultimately be this kind of religious—define the problems produced by the observational secular.

There is no doubt that the film fails to adequately put the snake handlers’ beliefs and practices into any sort of general cultural context and thereby refuses opportunities to think about the relationship—economic, political, psychological, gendered—between what the on-camera practitioners do and what they think. Filmmaker Peter Adair’s public comments about his personal history, combined with a rereading of the film, invite understanding the specific observational perspective of *Holy Ghost People*. Adair did reproduce certain tropes of the colonial gaze; he also used his cinematographic gaze to focus on particular physical elements of how his physical subjects spoke to one another in and through the ritual idiom they practiced.

Born in Los Angeles County, but raised in Navajo country, Adair was the son of the visual anthropologist John Adair, whose most famous work, the Navajo Filmmaking Project, involved teaching a group of Navajo people to make subjective films about themselves and their culture; he intended

43 Ernest Callenbach, review of *Holy Ghost People*, *Film Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Autumn 1968): 4.

44 William M. Clements, “Review Essay: Snake-Handlers on Film,” *Journal of American Folklore* 90, no. 358 (October–December 1977): 503–4.

45 Margaret Mead, review of *Holy Ghost People*, *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 70, no. 3 (1968): 655.

46 Elizabeth Mermin, “Burden of Representation: 1996 Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 6–7 (Summer/Fall 1997): 51.

47 Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); and David Walker, “The Humbug in American Religion: Ritual Theories of Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 23, no. 1 (2013): 30–74.



these films to both supplement the work of outside anthropologists and to explore broad questions about cross-cultural communication.<sup>48</sup> John Adair was a stock anthropological figure, “loving” Native American art and understanding that love as a meaningful mutuality and perceiving Navajo ingenuity with silversmithing as an emblem through which to expose the depth and substance of Indigenous cultures of the Southwest.<sup>49</sup> Peter Adair would later credit the experience of growing up on a reservation with shaping the way he approached his own films. “Being in the minority, and sometimes the only White kid around, started me looking at everything from the eyes of an outsider. So in a sense, all my films, even if they are about my peers, are cultural studies.”<sup>50</sup>

Such a genealogy could implicate the long anthropological legacy in Peter Adair’s documentary approach. Many of those archivists and anthropologists associated with the broad practice of salvage ethnography worked to record cultures they understood as “vanishing,” and they narratively structured this reclamation around paradigmatic figures—craftsmen, shamans, hunters—who became a metonym for an evaporating Indigenous nobility. Yet Adair’s film career did not evince an obsession with individual mythic subjects or the otherness of their power. Rather, his work increasingly focused on an effort to see *his* tribe, the LGBTQ community, as a broad social reality of diverse individual experience. In the two decades following *Holy Ghost People*, Adair became a legendary recorder of gay experience, perhaps most famously with his landmark collaborative project, *Word Is Out* (Mariposa Film Group, 1977), a documentary by and about queer men and women.<sup>51</sup> For the major part of his career, he spoke passionately about the work of bringing gay voices to light and to making their lives seem familiar, complicated, and human rather than exotic or dangerous.<sup>52</sup> He would not return to overtly religious subjects in his filmography, leaving *Holy Ghost People* as a topical exception to his work. How might we connect the filmmaker of *Holy Ghost People* with the filmmaker of *The AIDS Show* (with Rob Epstein, 1986) and *Absolutely Positive* (1991)? The obvious connection is the work of using a number of individual cases to comment on aggregate and marginalized social experience.

Yet a return to *Holy Ghost People* after reviewing Adair’s longer filmography invites a more intimate connection, focusing on the physical intensity he records in the film. The last scene shows the preacher after a snake bit his hand. As the preacher sops up the blood with a kerchief, he is heard saying some words of prayerful calm. The film concludes with a shot of his swollen hand. Hands are everywhere in the long worship scene that comprises

48 Sol Worth and John Adair, *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

49 Clifford Barnett, Richard Chalfen, James C. Faris, Susan Brown McGreevy, and Willow Roberts Powers, “John Adair, 1913–1997: Work across the Anthropological Spectrum,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 55, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 429–445.

50 David W. Dunlap, obituary of Peter Adair, *New York Times*, June 30, 1996, 30.

51 Thomas Waugh, *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 25; and Greg Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011), 37–38.

52 Interview with Linda Actel, August 1977, found in “Interview with Filmmakers—1977,” Peter Adair Papers, box 44, folder 14, James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center, San Francisco Public Library.

the majority of the film. Hands in the air, hands on cheeks, hands covering mouths, hands holding babies. Hands grabbing other hands. The unfocused ritual allows for multiple parallel physical realities. There are bored toddlers, quietly singing grandmothers, teen women speaking in tongues, and middle-aged men praying over someone. There is a coed duo singing a gospel tune. Physical intimacy predominates the scene. The camera tracks in and out of song and testimony, in and out of the bodies dancing, falling onto other bodies, as some sing. The film conveys a room in which no one is exactly synchronous as individuals access the spirit in a variety of ways but unite in delicate, quickly shifting moments by touch: touching one another, touching the snakes, touching his back or her neck, hugging quickly and moving forward languidly, rhythmically. Nobody once visibly shirks off a touch. Nobody slaps a hand away. You see women touching men but also men holding onto other men, accepting that touching is component to the spirit's presence.

The sexualization of religious behavior by non-religious and differently religious observers has a long and problematic interpretive history, including the sensationalizing of Catholic religious women by anti-Catholic Protestants, the description of African religious rites by colonial European settlers, and lurid accounts of polygamy in multiple traditions. But something about what Adair creates is not sexual, exactly. It is about the freedom to touch. In her work on Appalachia, Deborah Vansau McCauley writes:

Because tactility, touching, is so important to worship services, and has such a long tradition in the mountains, mountain people have their own norms and unspoken guidelines for where individuals can touch and how, so that this loving tradition in worship that is supposed to signify a little bit of heaven in the here and now—what social relationships are supposed to be like—is not corrupted by inappropriate behavior . . . By literally giving their hands to each other in worship, and by hugging and embracing with deep emotion, and often kissing, mountain people are giving their hearts, an act of profound faith boldly embodying their “hope of heaven.”<sup>53</sup>

McCauley describes exactly what *Holy Ghost People* records. With Adair's subsequent documentary interests in view, it becomes possible to read this film as documenting a queer parenthesis in heteropatriarchy, a ritual space where humans can feel each other out without coming out. Critics can rightly see the recorded result as exoticizing, as Adair depicts the world as remote, sequestered, and strange to the everyday lives of the presumptively irreligious audiences for the film. But the film invites us also to see how religious worship affords opportunities for physical expression not as available in irreligious life and how ritual structures a space where certain norms sit down and others stand forward. Adair's observational secular sets him in the in-between spaces where the communion, control, and freedom of religion reside. It would have been nice to hear the worshippers think about what

53 Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 387.

is unspoken, to name what that space meant to them in their physical life and erotic life. It is also possible that Adair worried what risk it would be to those he filmed if he forced them to voice what was freer in silence. In his cinematographic focus, he left a record of unnamed intimacy for subsequent audiences to debate.

### **SALESMAN**

One of the most actively promoted and widely distributed films of the observational documentary era in the United States, *Salesman*, directed by Albert and David Maysles, received mixed appraisal from early critics in 1969. Tough reviewers decided that the filmmakers disliked their subjects; kinder ones saw it as a document of the present capitalist situation without parallel.<sup>54</sup> The filmmakers felt they did something special and spoke frequently in the subsequent decades about the passion with which they committed to telling a humane story. “A couple of critics have been talking about some kind of condescension on our part, in selecting it,” Albert Maysles observed. “I don’t know what they’re talking about. Because I think what we’re doing is just the opposite of that.”<sup>55</sup> The film focused on a quartet of door-to-door Catholic Bible salesmen: Paul “Badger” Brennan; Charles “Gipper” McDevitt; James “Rabbit” Baker; and Raymond “Bull” Martos. McDevitt is the undisputed king of the salesmen, so successful at selling that he coaches his colleagues, but Brennan is the indisputable star of *Salesman*. The main narrative of the film is the realization of Brennan’s depth of character and his professional failure. It concludes with him in despair about his work and future. The main characters of *Salesman* seem gloomy even when—perhaps especially—under bright Florida skies.

The capitalist relations that structured the film’s subject made plain everyone’s consent in the picture. Mid-American Bible Company, the salesmen’s employer, cooperated with the film. The four salesmen volunteered to be onscreen, arguing that their sales improved when the cameras were present. Although they did not have approval of the final cut, they spoke in praise of what they saw. Even the door-to-door sales exhibited in the film were consensual, with salesmen only visiting houses of individuals who had filled out a card at church expressing interest in the Bible and the salesmen (and cameramen) only let inside with the resident’s consent. As Albert Maysles observed, “You knock on the door, and if you can’t be trusted right away, then you can’t get in the house.”<sup>56</sup>

Critics thought that the film staged the “ironies of capitalism” either very well or very poorly. As one writer observed, *Salesman* showed how “materialism had saturated even the religious sector—and how stealthily it had done so, as neither seller nor buyer was fully aware of the problematic nature of

54 “*Salesman* is a very shallow, remarkably superficial, predisposed and suspect of a quartet of door-to-door salesman.” John Mahoney, review of “*Salesman*,” *Hollywood Reporter*, June 12, 1969.

55 “J” interviews Albert Maysles, “Manuscripts: Interviews of DM + AM, complete 2-part transcript,” DMP, box 2, folder 7, 5.

56 “J” interviews Albert Maysles, “Manuscripts: Interviews of DM + AM, complete 2-part transcript,” DMP, box 2, folder 7, 4.

the relationship . . . of religion and business.”<sup>57</sup> Such viewers saw in the film a group of peddlers hustling wares that should be sacred, not profaned by marketing. This reaction misses what the salesmen understood about their work and what the Maysles brothers show them doing onscreen. The salesmen do not see selling the Bible as a hypocritical practice. “Some of you at one time or another may or may not have had a higher income,” the vice president of the company preached to them, “but you have never held a higher position of esteem in the minds of the world or in your own self-satisfaction.” The problem in the film isn’t that selling contradicts Christian values; it is that being successful at selling makes a person feel good, and being unsuccessful makes a person feel badly. *Salesman* shows and has its characters articulate the relentlessness of work-discipline. The film tracks the daily work of getting up, going to work, trying again, succeeding or failing, returning home, relaxing briefly, then returning anew to the work again. Religion is not only coincidentally the salesmen’s product but also the thrum of their ritualized return to work after yesterday’s failure.

The personal investment in the subject emerges from the filmmakers.<sup>58</sup> “The whole process of making the film is exactly the process of our own personal discovery of the subject,” David Maysles observed.<sup>59</sup>

Interviewer: By this same token, when you make a film about Bible-salesmen, does this mean that you’d like to sell Bibles?

Albert Maysles: Yes, in a sense, I think that the reason we choose a subject for a film has to do with the fact that we begin to find a lot of ourselves in the subject.<sup>60</sup>

The Maysles brothers were the children of Russian-Jewish immigrants, raised in the ethnically diverse, but historically Irish-Catholic, Dorchester area of Boston. In their early adulthood, both brothers initially transferred curiosity about ethnic difference to the study of psychology; they majored in the subject at Syracuse University, and Albert taught psychology at Boston University in the mid-1950s. They both sold products door-to-door—David sold Avon; Albert sold encyclopedias. When an interviewer asks if they were Irish-Catholic, David said, “No, Jewish. But I always wanted—I think I wanted to be one. I’m finding that out. . . . I wanted to be one when I was a kid. . . . Instead of a love-hate thing . . . there were sports heroes in our school and, I guess, I wanted to be a sports hero. I like to play ice hockey and I—the team was all Irish-Catholic.”<sup>61</sup> Filming *Salesman*, the Maysles brothers nestled near those

57 Jonathan B. Vogels, “*Salesman* and the Limits of Language,” in *The Direct Cinema of David and Albert Maysles* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010).

58 Wheeler Winston Dixon, “An Interview with Albert Maysles,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 20, no. 3 (2003): 177–192.

59 “Interview: Albert Maysles and David Maysles; Friday, the 31st of March, 1967,” DMP, box 2, folder 10, 9.

60 “Interview: Albert Maysles and David Maysles; Friday, the 31st of March, 1967,” DMP, box 2, folder 10, 8.

61 “J” interviews David Maysles, “Manuscripts: Interviews of DM + AM, complete 2-part transcript,” DMP, box 2, folder 8, 4.

who had tormented them and those whom they had hoped to be. The observational secular again finds the filmmaker depicting relations of intimacy in order to convey human difference humanely.

The Maysles brothers wanted to solve the problem of their own otherness by studying people familiar to them. The brothers repeatedly spoke of how Paul Brennan reminded them of their father, insofar as he was an unsuccessful salesman and often played around with an Irish brogue.<sup>62</sup> For the filmmakers, the focus on Bible salesmen was not a condescending look but a familial stare: these were people they knew, grew up with, and felt they understood. This sense of commiseration comes through in what the Maysles brothers chose to include onscreen. Frontstage and backstage are on full display. We see the salesmen joke, self-remonstrate, push one another, and articulate irritation. They complain about the people to whom they sell even as they also offer compassion to those who seemed hard up. The viewer isn't seeing sales as much as discussions of the sales in hotel rooms, conference halls, and walking from place to place. Everyone onscreen can be serious and funny, normal and weird, competent and failed. When Catholic Brennan repeatedly hums and sings the chorus from "If I Were a Rich Man," from the Jewish musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, and Joseph Stein, 1964), the camera doesn't force the viewer to see this moment as ironic. The observational secular of the Maysles brothers meant that they set themselves in a relational imminence without judgment or partiality. The camera watches as Brennan works through his day, hums to energize, even as failure hounds him. *Salesman* shows the human effort to make a single day a success. It suggests that success is, in part, how individuals explain to themselves why they are failing and whether they can continue to develop such alibis without falling into despair. *Salesman* is a metonym for documentary itself, insofar as the film observes how individuals try to get people to do what they want them to do without divulging the truth of who they are.

## CONCLUSION

In an interview, Albert Maysles recalled a scene deleted from the final cut of *Salesman*, in which two salesmen were refused entry to a house with a supposedly promising lead. One of the two Bible salesmen muttered as he walked away, "No matter what you do, after Wednesday the leads are no fucking good." Maysles sees in this moment everything he valued. "Geez, I mean, all of life is right there," he said. "The whole concept of this is so beautiful. What a man can do in his own territory. That's everybody's life. What can a man do with what's given him?"<sup>63</sup> Here, Maysles points to a throwaway moment when a salesman walks disappointed from a home. It is *throwaway* in multiple senses: it is a moment on which filmmakers did not previously focus; it is a

62 "Z" interviews David Maysles, "Manuscripts: Interviews of DM + AM, complete 2-part transcript," DMP, box 2, folder 10, 6–7; and "J" interviews David Maysles, "Manuscripts: Interviews of DM + AM, complete 2-part transcript," DMP, box 2, folder 8, 39.

63 "J" interviews Albert Maysles, "Manuscripts: Interviews of DM + AM, complete 2-part transcript," DMP, box 2, folder 7, 33.

moment cut from the picture; it is a moment when the subjects feel thrown away. In this self-description of a salesman's frustration—with his company, with his job, with the limits of his daily effort—the filmmaker finds a thesis for his perception of all of life.

Critics haven't decided whether those who engaged in observational cinema succeeded in their ambitions.<sup>64</sup> Claims of observational neutrality by Direct Cinema filmmakers camouflaged their shaping influence and left them open to subsequent accusations by critics and viewers that they had failed to fulfill their ideals.<sup>65</sup> Even as Direct Cinema filmmakers resisted any suggestions that they staged scenes, they admitted that they still played a role in what the audience saw. "I think there's always something in the rushes that's better than what's in the final film," Albert Maysles said to an interviewer.<sup>66</sup> Maysles suggests that the best parts of documentary are the pieces left behind in the final cut. As Hall's work on *Primary* suggests, understanding Direct Cinema requires recognition that its editing style is a strong component to its conscientious argument. As David Maysles noted, "We are very, very objective in the shooting. I call them less objective in the editing."<sup>67</sup> In this article, I did not focus on the editorial process for documentary filmmaking. Rather, I asked whether another form of categorical enclosure, religion, is a way to talk about how editorial choices in documentary default more often to certain hermeneutic emphases over others. Insofar as documentary has not represented religion as well as its other topics, talking about what it means to do it well exposes the unstated ideological seams of documentary's secularism.

To watch the best documentaries is to see films that have beautiful, even breathtaking shots; that have a sense of unveiling through their seeing; that have a lingering look on things not often seen. Even more—perhaps most of all—the best documentaries don't let us get away with thinking that what they document is something wholly other from the audience for the documentary. The best documentaries don't let us think we, the viewers, aren't in this too. Instead, they show us that we might not have been heroes during the Holocaust. That we might have been a part of the system that wrongly convicted Randall Dale Adams, the man sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit, in Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*. That we see our city as ours to own, just as *Man with the Movie Camera* shows Soviet citizens in Kiev, Kharkov, Moscow, and Odessa at work and at play and interacting with the machinery of modern life. These great films show us not only something the director is looking at but also something that we participate to create. Most depictions of religion in documentary film cannot achieve this quality of documentary engagement because the filmmaker cannot get over the occupational hazard of their secularism. Focusing on three films from Direct Cinema, we

64 The recent reclamation of observational technique suggests its endurance as a reformer impulse. See Erika Balsam, "The Reality-Based Community," *E-Flux Journal*, no. 83 (June 2017).

65 Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 100.

66 "J" interviews Albert Maysles, "Manuscripts: Interviews of DM + AM, complete 2-part transcript," DMP, box 2, folder 7, 28.

67 "Z" interviews David Maysles, "Manuscripts: Interviews of DM + AM, complete 2-part transcript," DMP, box 2, folder 10, 19.

find filmmakers who are, indeed, self-identified secular subjects. Yet they worked to see inside the space of religion rather than decide its oppressions at the outset. The observational secular in these films is the perspective that leads filmmakers to give space for their subjects to join the conversation: to correct, to reply, to explain how they exist in “the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.”<sup>68</sup> These replies can be in fierce monologues spoken to others on camera; they may be in gestures of intimacy in worship spaces; they may also be in letting people feel frustrated in the slow fact of life’s layers of disappointments.

A great documentary on a religious subject would require a gaze that could account for its complicity with the world it saw. Not as an exhibit to be in awe of, or an idea to debunk, or a problem estranged from us to understand, but as a thing we, too, need; we, too, make; we, too, believe. Trinh T. Minh-Ha has said, “the ‘documentary’ often forgets how it comes about and how aesthetics and politics remain inseparable in its constitution.”<sup>69</sup> Religion is at the origin of the aesthetic choices for documentary and the colonial politics that gave rise to its first makers. From the beginning, documentary was a missionary tool of secular life. Knowing how this influences what we want from documentary film will also change how we judge its success.

Acknowledgments: This article began as a response to a prompt offered in 2017 by the Center for the Study of Religion at the Ohio State University for a public discussion with Judith Weisenfeld on “Religion, Media and Narrative.” I give thanks to her for many years of personal commiseration, intellectual provocation, and field leadership, as well as to Sarah Johnston, Hugh Urban, and Isaac Weiner for their incisive questions. I am grateful to Faye Thompson at the Margaret Herrick Library, May Hong Haduong at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Film Archive, Laura Russo at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University, and the staff at the James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center of the San Francisco Public Library. The three anonymous reviewers recruited by *JCMS* were among the best reviewers I have engaged; I thank them for their generosity and detail. I am also deeply grateful to Marko Geslani, Jacqueline Goldsby, Lucia Hulsether, Tina Post, Caleb Smith, and David Walker for their readings of earlier drafts. This article is halfway to what Kati Curts saw was possible; I dedicate it to her and the conversation we share.

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68 Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” *History of Religions* 20, no. 1/2 (1980): 125.

69 Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 89.