

**Documentary Film: An Analysis of Dominant Modalities
in *Salesman* (1969), *Brother's Keeper* (1992), and *F for Fake* (1973)**

Documentary film has typically been classified according to six general categories: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. While some documentaries might entertain only one of these dominant modes, many explore multiple classifications at the same time. For instance, Orson Welles's last major film *F for Fake* (1973) crosses a wide range of categories, from participatory to reflexive to performative. Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's *Brother's Keeper* (1992) limits itself to only two modes of documentary filmmaking: observational and participatory. While *Salesman* (1969) by Albert and David Maysles, is purely observational. What is remarkable about each of these films, however, is their individual similarities and differences.

According to *Vogue* magazine, "*Salesman* is a funny film about sadness, a cruel film about sensibilities, a patter-filled film about dumbness."¹ Filmed in black and white, the documentary follows a handful of door-to-door bible peddlers across late 1960's United States terrain, negotiating the daily rejection and elation of the sales industry. Paul Brennan is a central character throughout, whose emotional responses to the successes and failures of his work fluctuate between hilarious and

¹ *VOGUE*, March 15, 1969,
<http://www.mayslesfilms.com/films/films/salesman.html>

heartbreaking. Each of the salesmen featured in the film is forced to confront a certain degree of moral turpitude as they charge hefty amounts of money to lower to middle income households for their wares.

As a primarily observational documentary, *Salesman* seeks to be as objective as possible, allowing the audience to reach its own conclusions. Unlike the expository mode of documentary filmmaking, *Salesman* includes no narration or voiceover to inform its viewers of the appropriate interpretation of onscreen action or dialogue. It does not attempt to influence or persuade, but simply to depict experience as truthfully as the camera permits. And unlike other participatory documentaries, Albert and David Maysles refrain from inserting themselves or their points of view into *Salesman*, remaining content to let the film's characters tell their own stories. This is a feat that the filmmakers appear to pull off effortlessly as we observe Brennan and his coworkers endure frustration, indecision, and debatable ethics as they struggle to make a living selling bibles on the road.

By way of comparison, it could be argued that Clifford Irving's literary appropriation of Howard Hughes's biography in *F for Fake* is not more than a stone's throw away from Paul Brennan's objective to sell another work of questionable veracity as a bible salesman. Though the target market is decidedly more highbrow, Irving is certainly peddling his own "hoax biography." In the film, Welles reveals Irving as a writer seeking to redeem himself from a specious history of counterfeit memoir. And Welles

cleverly mirrors Irving's tendency toward imitation in the subject of his next biographical project, documenting Elmyr de Hory's life as a master of forgery (or painterly illusion). Of course, Welles does not miss the chance to situate himself squarely in the middle of the action, taking on the roles of both narrator of the film and one of its subjects (in reference to the 1938 radiobroadcast of *War of the Worlds* in which the artist inadvertently created widespread panic amongst listeners who perceived the broadcast as true). Welles is also seen drinking, smoking cigars, and otherwise carousing with Irving and de Hory, not at all shying away from implied associations with other artists who have a reputation for falsity.

In this sense, *F for Fake* is a reflexive and participatory documentary.