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3Sep01

[Salesman](#) By Toby Miller

The Maysles Brothers' *Gimme Shelter* takes one of the defining moments of the 1960s, the Rolling Stones' Altamont concert, and helps us see what all the fuss of youth rebellion was all about. Given their prowess in examining the counterculture of that tumultuous decade, it's doubly impressive that their exquisite *Salesman* (1969) so skillfully details the "other" '60s, the world of "ordinary" people animated by making do with everyday life rather than preoccupations with Vietnam, drugs, and social change. These are the door-to-door Bible salesmen and their customers, and they occupy a world of starched white shirts, dark ties, pork-pie hats, and morning cigarette coughs—a world far removed from tie-dyes, beads, long hair, and pot highs.

Salesman takes us inside the diurnal rituals and disappointments of men who clearly resemble Willy Loman from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The result is a classic of American normalcy exposed. The difference between this and Miller's play is that the dialogue here is, of course, real: the clients' curlers are in, their Muzak LPs are playing, and we're really no longer in Kansas, Toto. Both Albert and David Maysles had been door-to-door salesmen—brushes, cosmetics, encyclopedias, you name it. They knew this world of pseudo-intimacy and carpetbagger pushiness, in all its improbable, American folksiness. When, making this film, they turned up at peoples' doors with the salesmen, recording equipment in tow, they too became part of the pitch, or as it was politely called, "presentation." When folks permitted the salesmen and filmmakers to enter, they were invited to do so as part of a "human interest story." The result was an instant classic, one that's been part of the documentary canon for over three decades.

The key sales characters each have animal nicknames—the Rabbit, the Gipper, the Bull, and the one we hear from the most, the Badger (Paul Brennan). Alongside the others, the Badger is hardly a go-getter. He becomes Willy Loman, but self-consciously so. His sales figures are down, and so is his confidence. As he compensates by telling his co-workers and his boss various stories about the people he meets and the impossibility of closing sales with them, his projections of inadequacy become overpowering and compelling. The Badger's more successful colleagues can barely stand to hear these ironic, witty, self-pitying tales of woe. The looks on their faces become more and more resigned, less and less prepared to engage. The Badger becomes someone you turn away from. He is the person—the future—you hope not to be.

Underneath this critique of failure and smallness lies a more powerful indictment of American commercial

society: its petty obsessions with status, its propensity to exploit the gullible, its way of concealing exploitation behind goodwill, and above all, its snide trick of offering religion and its promise of deliverance in the afterlife, rather than improvements in everyday life. This is all the more poignant here, where faith itself is neatly commodified as though it were a new model of vacuum cleaner.

The Badger—Paul—evokes this desolate territory pithily and tragically, all the while singing “If I Were a Rich Man.” His *bons mots* include referring to “ball-breaking territory” where householders are “ducking behind doors.” His colleagues’ suggestions that “It’s not the bum territory—it’s the bum in the territory” help him rationalize this. Paul’s associates smilingly inflate themselves and their sales plans at a convention with a smarmy self-satisfaction that the filmmakers intercut with footage of Paul. He is elsewhere, staring depressively from a rail carriage, watching America pass by while somewhere else, imaginary numbers float from the mouths of his competitor-colleagues. Whereas they happily participate in improbably banal role-playing practice and hype sessions to hone their skills and feel better about themselves, Paul is always wry and dubious, never far from mocking sincerity—sold door-to-door.



[Salesman](#)

[Albert Maysles](#), [David Maysles](#) and [Charlotte Zwerin](#)

1968

91 min

Black and White

1.33:1

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Wed 16 Jun at 11:57 AM

Bobby Finger

What a wonderful essay. This paragraph in particular deserves to be repeated here:

Underneath this critique of failure and smallness lies a more powerful indictment of American commercial society: its petty obsessions with status, its propensity to exploit the gullible, its way of concealing exploitation behind goodwill, and above all, its snide trick of offering religion and its promise of deliverance in the afterlife, rather than improvements in everyday life. This is all the more poignant here, where faith itself is neatly commodified as though it were a new model of vacuum cleaner.

Salesman is one of the most powerful films I've ever seen, still resonating four years after seeing it for the first time. It's uncompromisingly sad throughout because it has to be. How else can this story be told? How else can we get the message? Like the New Journalists, the Maysles took the most ordinary of men and their clients (or marks?) and (seemingly effortlessly) created this profound, unparalleled examination of American life. It's still relevant, bleak, and absolutely essential viewing.

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