

Salesman

(USA, 1969)

Directors: Albert and David Maysles

Label: Criterion Collection (USA)

Region: 0 (NTSC)

Discs: 1

THE FILM

The Maysles brothers were pioneers of American 'direct cinema', making documentaries that eschewed voice-over and talking heads to create intimate, candid portraits of people and their livelihoods, typically constructed from hundreds of hours of observational footage. Many of their films, such as the Rolling Stones concert film *Gimme Shelter* and *Grey Gardens*, on the eccentric Jackie O relatives Edith and Edie Beale, have become cult classics. But the brothers' first feature was on a decidedly less glamorous topic: travelling Bible salesmen. Co-credited to their frequent editor Charlotte Zwerin, it is a landmark documentary: an aesthetic masterpiece, extraordinary for both its compassionate handling of its subjects and its profound socio-cultural insight.

Salesman follows four men working for the Mid-American Bible Company as they travel the country peddling their wares to poor and working-class Catholic families. Venturing into private homes, we watch their sales pitches with horror or humour, but also suspense. We join them in dismal motel rooms and cafeterias, and at sales meetings where their superiors hail selling as the ultimate form of self-actualisation – and by extension, failure to sell as personal deficiency. Each man tackles this challenge differently, and the film comes to focus on Paul Brennan, whose poor sales correlate with his increasingly bitter cynicism. What emerges is not only an inescapably affecting portrait of a man in a particular time and profession, but also powerful perspective into the inner workings of American consumer capitalism, religion, and the human condition.

As David says in an old interview on the DVD, *Salesman* should make us 'depressed as hell'. But the filmmakers are also encouraging us to examine our own lives and livelihoods, and this is what allows the film to transcend its historical context. In this golden age of media exploitation, we would all do well to experience *Salesman* – a sensitively crafted, intimate human drama of epic proportions.

THE DISC

The black-and-white 16mm original has been beautifully rendered in Criterion's transfer, although occasional hairs in the gate still pop up in frame. The sound has been restored, but the disc's excellent optional English subtitles may help those challenged by the characters' heavy Boston accents. Extras include wonderfully insightful commentary by Albert Maysles and Zwerin recorded in 2001 (David passed away in 1987), an oddly shot but informative 1969 television interview with the brothers by *Newsweek* critic Jack Kroll, and a National Public Radio interview with James Baker, the last surviving salesman, from 2000. Also included are filmographies, the original theatrical trailer, and revelatory behind-the-scenes photos. (VERA BRUNNER-SUNG)