



Salesman Discussion Guide

Directors: Albert & David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin

Year: 1968

Time: 90 min

You might know these directors from:

The Gates (2007)

Thelonus Monk: Straight, No Chaser (1988)

Grey Gardens (1975)

Gimme Shelter (1970)

FILM SUMMARY

Inspired by Truman Capote's ground-breaking novel 'In Cold Blood,' SALESMAN takes a panoramic view of four door-to-door salesmen as they ply across the American Northeast and Miami trying to sell expensive bibles to low-income families. Paul 'The Badger' Brennan, a funny, intelligent and sharp-tongued Catholic Irish American from Boston is the focus of the film. His lack of success leads to increasing frustration, as well as some funny impressions about the various potential customers he encounters.

Local churches provide the names of potential customers, and the operation is overseen by a brash team leader given to slightly manipulative motivational speeches that draw heavily on American Dream ideals. SALESMAN is a glimpse into a bygone era, one where a strange man knocking on your door would be invited in, served coffee and perhaps a biscuit, and listened to with utter politeness. Because the salesmen are seen as representatives of the church, their devout customers are hesitant to decline the pitch, which ultimately leads to uncomfortable situations in which the salesman employ every trick in their arsenal to close the deal.

Perhaps most fascinating of all is the look into a world where everyone smoked and women slept with their hair in curlers. Neither stylised nor glamorous, the film portrays unvarnished working people who are working to capture that elusive American Dream any way they can.

FILM THEMES

SALESMAN is a film of desperation and loneliness. It's about chasing the American Dream and facing failure in a culture where everyone is under pressure to be a success.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The bible salesmen in the film are told that hard work will bring them success, and if they aren't a success it's their own fault. It's a variation on the American Dream: if you work hard you will do well in life. Many of us are told as children that hard work will get us where we want, only to discover, like the main character in SALESMAN, that oftentimes hard work isn't enough. Luck, timing, connections, culture and a host of other factors also play a part in our success. Without this understanding, people are vulnerable to despair, blaming themselves unnecessarily when they fail to attain a certain level and definition of success.

DESPERATION

Paul Brennan becomes increasingly desperate as his colleagues continue to make sales while he often returns to his hotel room dejected and empty-handed. Desperation often makes us lose sight of the larger picture and pushes us to make decisions that aren't necessarily in our best interest. As a result of Paul's anxiety and fear, his sales pitch gradually becomes harsher, less controlled and more off-putting. Acting from a place of desperation causes us to lose perspective and make rash decisions that can have long-term consequences.

LONELINESS

For a travelling salesman, life on the road is lonely. Cheap hotel rooms, bad food, numbing sports on the television, and the weight of making the sale constantly hang over everything. There is no family to go home to at the end of the day. The salesmen speak only with their co-workers and potential clients. This leads to drinking, heavy smoking and sometimes refreshing bouts of silliness, but one can feel the oppressive day-to-day loneliness when the salesmen call home to their wives. They don't have much to say, but need to hear that voice they know so well, if only to get them through another day.

FAILURE

As the film progresses, it becomes apparent that Paul is not suited to the work of a travelling salesman. His banter with customers becomes increasingly awkward, and even Paul can see that his time has passed and he will not make his sales quotas. Paul's way of facing failure is to mock the customers through mimicry, make biting jokes about the job itself, and complain about the lack of good leads. He can't quite admit that he's ill-suited for the role, but one gets the sense that the middle-aged Paul can't see any option other than to keep pushing forward in hopes that things will change.

“If a man's not a success, he's got no one to blame but himself.”

'The Rabbit'

“A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.”

Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

“The essential thing about our work is not making believe, but finding out.”

Robert Maysles

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Describe your personal experiences with door-to-door salesman. Did the film change your perspective on these professionals?
2. The salesmen are selling expensive bibles to people who are probably least able to afford them. Do you think the salesman exploited these peoples' faith, and to what extent?
3. The salesmen received customer leads from the local church. What was your reaction to the church being involved in the process?
4. Much of the film focuses on Paul Brennan, who struggles to make profitable sales as the film progresses. In your opinion, what factors hindered Paul's success?
5. SALESMAN is a fly-on-the-wall documentary. Why do you think the various subjects in the film were so unguarded and natural, so unaffected by the presence of cameras?
6. Can you imagine door-to-door salesmen still working in today's world? Why or why not?
7. Paul Brennan has often been compared to Willy Loman, the main character in Arthur Miller's novel, "Death of a Salesman." Do you see this as a valid comparison? Why or why not?
8. SALESMAN reflects mid-1960s materialism, though it may seem mild to us now. Compare the materialism then to what we experience today. Have the American Dream values changed at all?
9. What was your reaction to the Chicago sales meeting where God was invoked and the salesmen were told it was their own fault if they weren't a success?
10. Toward the film's end, Paul's continual excuses and biting wit lead to discomfort amongst his co-workers. Why do you think they reacted as they did?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Truman Capote’s non-fiction novel ‘In Cold Blood’ inspired the Maysleys brothers to make SALESMAN after they completed a film about the author.
- SALESMAN is considered to have broken and/or rewritten many of the rules of documentary. It represented factual films in a new way that was dubbed ‘Direct Cinema’, which allows the film to unveil itself, rather than the director attempting to influence or structure it.
- In 1992, SALESMAN was selected for preservation in the U.S. National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”
- Legendary film critic Pauline Kael erroneously claimed that Paul Brennan was recruited by the Maysleys Brothers and was, in fact, a roof and siding salesman. The claim was disputed by Paul Brennan himself. This was not the first time the Maysles butted heads with Kael. Kael was not a fan of the Maysles’ film GIMME SHELTER either, and one could read in her review the suggestion that the Maysles brothers were responsible for the death at Altamont. The dispute raged for several years, nearly making the front page of the New York Times.
- Melbourne I. Feltman, the Mid-American Bible Company’s “Theological Consultant” is said to have placed 20 million bibles in Christian homes in a 17-year span.
- Paul Brennan quit door-to-door bible sales one year after the filming of SALESMAN. Never finding financial success, Paul spent his last years in charity care.
- Albert Maysles remained friends with Paul Brennan until the end of Paul’s life.
- The phone call Paul Brennan made to his wife in the film occurred during their separation, which eventually led to their divorce.
- Albert Maysles has been called the Godfather of Documentary cinema.
- David and Albert Maysles worked as travelling salesmen in their youth.
- Critic Gene Siskel named SALESMAN one of the ten best films of 1970.
- No less an authority than French film director and critic Jean-Luc Godard once referred to Albert as “the best American cameraman.”

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film with others. Discuss how the world has changed since 1968 and whether the changes are positive, negative, or a bit of both.
2. Consider how the need to make money impacts your life – and how much you really need in order to consider yourself “successful.”
3. Look at those around you who are struggling to keep their lives afloat. What could you do to help alleviate their struggles, even if in a small way?
4. Open your eyes to the fact that your community most likely is filled with fascinating older people who have wonderful stories to share about their lives. Seek them out and see how rewarding it can be to hear their stories of bygone times. Just by listening to their stories, you could give them a great gift.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.