Laurel Westrup

Medias Martyrs?
Rock ‘n’ Roll, Film and the Political Economy of Death

As we are all aware, the death of cinema has been lamented as long as it has existed, however, cinema is not the only popular art form to be declared dead on arrival. Rock music, variously called rock’n’roll, rockabilly, and in some cases “that awful noise,” is another art which has been dying since its birth. But while the deaths of cinema and rock music have frequently been announced, there is still relatively little scholarship on death in film and rock music. On the film studies side, what work does exist tends to focus on the technological, ontological, and/or theoretical abilities of cinema to represent death on screen. Meanwhile, rock critics have made light of death and fans have concocted elaborate conspiracy theories about who killed Hendrix and Hutchence. It is my contention that these approaches, all of which are interesting in their own right, often miss something crucial – namely, the bottom line. Death is not only one of the great philosophical mysteries of human existence but is also, perhaps for this reason, a box office draw. As part of a larger project concerning the conjunction of rock music culture, moving image media, and death, I here propose Michael Wadleigh’s 1970 film Woodstock and the Maysles brothers’ and Charlotte Zwerin’s film Gimme Shelter, released the same year, as interrelated case studies that expose the role of death in the production, exhibition, and marketing of rock films.

The period of 1969-1970 is often seen as the period of rock music’s maturation due to the large scale popularity and visibility of rock music festivals such as Woodstock, and the crystallization of American counterculture around rock music. I argue that this period, which also marks the rise of concert film production beginning in the mid-1960s, is the first “moment” at which film becomes involved in mediating or “mediatizing,” to use Phillip Auslander’s term, the relationship between rock performance and death. The period of 1969-1970 marks the culmination of the craze for concert films, with their emphasis on “capturing” rock performance. Initiated largely by D.A. Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers in the mid-1960s, the mode of documentary filmmaking taken up by the concert film is important in its claims to “authenticity” stemming from cinema vérité (literally “true” or “truthful” cinema) and direct cinema traditions. Such claims to the “true” or “authentic” representation of rock concerts were taken up in the marketing and reception of these films, but more importantly the mode allowed the films to be taken up as a means by which rock music culture could view itself. Indeed, the period of 1969-70 not only marked the rise of the concert film but, in part because of this, was also a crucial moment at which rock music culture began to “look” at itself (both on screen and off) by way of a number of crucial and interconnected events: Rolling Stones band member Brian Jones’ death in July 1969, the release of Leslie Woodhead’s film of the subsequent memorial concert in 1969 (The Stones in the Park), the Woodstock Festival in August 1969, the Altamont Speedway concert in December 1969 at which concertgoer Meredith Hunter was stabbed to death, the release of the...
films made about these two events (Woodstock, released in March 1970 and Gimme Shelter, released in December 1970), the death of Jimi Hendrix in September 1970, and the death of Janis Joplin in October 1970. I contend that the rash of deaths connected to rock musicians and rock concerts in this period, as well as observations concerning the death of the rock-oriented counterculture as a result of these events, worked to spur the popular and critical success of “rockumentaries” like Woodstock and Gimme Shelter, not only in their initial releases, but in subsequent theatrical and video releases as well. In my larger project, Woodstock and Gimme Shelter are at the crux of what I see as a far reaching political economy of death whereby the cinema calls upon death (real, imaginary or expected) as a marketing strategy.

I use “political economy” rather than “economy” to emphasize the deep social structures which impact and are impacted by economics. My thinking in this regard is informed by Jacques Attali’s influential study Noise, in which he traces the political economy of music from the Middle Ages to the 1970s. He posits four distinctive, but interpenetrating phases of the political economy of music: first listening, which is a sort of prehistory of music prior to its institutional function via the courts and concert halls of the European heads of state; next representation, in which he draws a connection between the abstract value of money and music with the rise of capitalism; next repetition, in which his argument largely echoes the late capitalist malaise and postmodernist skepticism characteristic of 1977 when the book first appeared; and finally composition, a sort of utopian projection for the future in which music is able, in some sense, to escape the capitalist imperative by recourse to the pleasures of making music for music’s sake. His overarching argument is that music predicts and perhaps precipitates full scale change in society as a result of its reimagining the political economy on its own, ever changing terms.

While Attali’s work is incredibly useful in thinking through the relationship between musical codes and social codes, I take issue with his discussion of repetition, which is symptomatic of a refusal to see late capitalism as anything other than a wasteland of empty simulacra and meaningless mass consumption. So skeptical is Attali about this period, that he foresees the commodification even of death, suggesting that in the same way that we stockpile records which we will never listen to, we will buy and stockpile the means to various deaths, in this sense purchasing stock in suicide. Here death and music both lose any meaning beyond possession. But certainly there are other ways in which we can conceive of the political economy of music and death in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The key to this reevaluation might be found in focusing not solely on the macrostructures of political economy as Attali and others do, but in also taking account of the personal and sub/countercultural politics which are crucial to what Henry Jenkins has characterized as affective economics.

In Jenkins’ recent book Convergence Culture he introduces affective economics in the context of the television show American Idol as a way of talking about the creation of audiences’ qualitative investments in media properties. Media producers and advertisers must tap into these emotional reserves if they are to profit in an increasingly cluttered mediasphere. Affective economics, then, are quite simply the economics of emotional investment. But while Jenkins discusses affective economics in terms of American Idol’s development and maintenance of positive feelings and/or attachments on the part of the audience, I argue that affective economics can tap into a much wider array of the emotional spectrum. In the case of Gimme Shelter and Woodstock fear and mourning, both affectively imbued, are exploited by filmmakers, marketers, and critics alike in order to cement these films’ status not only as box office successes, but also as important cultural documents of an era. In their symbiotic relationship, Woodstock and Gimme Shelter exploit their audiences’ fear of dying and their need to mourn and/or memorialize real and figurative deaths of the 1969-70 period.

In the discourse that surrounds the apotheosis and demise of the 1960s counterculture both concurrent and subsequent to that era, the Woodstock and Altamont concerts are virtually inseparable. But why? Well, for one thing, these events were captured on film and hence made available for re-viewing ad nauseum. While Altamont had already been labeled the anti-
Woodstock before *Gimme Shelter* (or *Woodstock*, for that matter) appeared in theaters, it was these films, their marketing, and their reception, which worked to cement the dichotomy between Woodstock as the peaceful celebration of hippiedom and Altamont as its dark other. A brief survey of the critical reception of *Gimme Shelter*, released nine months after the *Woodstock* film, would have us believe that there is very little else to the picture. Typical of this consensus are the reviews in *Time*: “The Age of Aquarius ended with the flash of a knife early last December on a tumble-down raceway near Altamont, Calif. […] It was hard to believe that Woodstock had taken place back East just four months before;” *Motion Picture Herald*: “Everybody who came away from Woodstock did so with the general feeling that a wonderful experience had been had, a weekend of music and good times and good feelings. But at Altamont, violence spoiled any chance of revealing those happier surroundings;” *Cosmopolitan*: “Where love and peace were the symbols of the Woodstock festival, hostility and hate seem to have reigned at Altamont;” and *Films and Filming*: “Altamont will be discussed for a long time by people both inside and outside of the experience. Coming so shortly after Woodstock it was violently shattering in contrast. An equivalent number of people experiencing the same Woodstock ‘thing’ turns into a bumper ‘bummer’ writ large.”

David and Albert Maysles and co-director Charlotte Zwerin responded to a *New York Times* article accusing *Gimme Shelter* of sensationalized violence by way of a letter to the editor stating “Altamont and the killing in front of the stage happened. It was not Woodstock!”

There are, however, exceptions to the simplistic opposition between Woodstock and Altamont set up by this critical mass. In Joel Haycock’s review of the two films in the Summer 1971 issue of *Film Quarterly* he says that “The inter-relationship between the two events is so directly drawn by so many people that one can’t help but nurture some suspicions.” Haycock backs his unpopular assessment by pointing to the fact that Woodstock was complete with beatings, three deaths, and an incident where a crowd screamed for a man on a scaffold to “Jump.” Similarly, the Maysles brothers’ cameramen, reportedly instructed to film “gestures of love” at Altamont, found plenty.

In other words, the perceived difference between the two festivals is largely the result of their filmic and extrafilmic framing. Instructive here are the publicity photos and taglines for the two films. In a typical publicity still for *Woodstock* (fig. 1), an Eden-esque picture is painted as two nude hippies bathe in a peaceful pond framed by tree branches. Even more to the point is an advertisement for the film which uses six stills from the film, including the one described above (fig. 2). The photographs
are labeled “peace,” “people,” “love,” “grass,” “music,” and “America.” The ideological slant of this marketing campaign could not be more obvious. Woodstock here becomes the great unifier of a country in turmoil. This is certainly not the case in the marketing for *Gimme Shelter*. In an oft-used publicity still from the film (fig. 3), the Altamont stage is subsumed by an image of violence in which the Hell’s Angels, with pool cues upraised, reign over frightened concertgoers. Even less subtle is the tagline used for subsequent releases of the film, which states “December 6, 1969: the day the sixties died.” It would be difficult to find a more direct appeal to the audience’s potential desire to witness demise.

My goal here is not to re-entrench the Woodstock/Altamont divide, nor to suggest that there were no real differences between the festivals and their films, but rather to look at the productive function of death, real and figurative, in relation to both films. *Woodstock* ultimately assumes a memorial function via the real deaths of Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix which *Gimme Shelter* does not, and *Gimme Shelter* arguably works as a sort of horror film capitalizing on American culture’s fear of and fascination with death in a way that *Woodstock* does not. But before I talk about the real deaths that haunt the frames of these films, I must first address the figurative death so brazenly used as a marketing ploy in the previously mentioned tagline. As we have already begun to see, the death of the counterculture is one of the central tropes which was used, and continues to be used in the discourse around *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter*. I argue that it is in fact this figurative death which first allows the two films, in their symbiotic relationship, to enter public consciousness and the national imaginary.

While *Woodstock* was originally meant to be released in December of 1969, a release date which would have allowed it to play concurrently with the Altamont festival, the tremendous amount of footage, in addition to disputes between director Wadleigh and the film’s distributor, Warner Bros., delayed its release until March 1970. What this means is that the widely reported death of Meredith Hunter at the Altamont festival impacted not only *Gimme Shelter*, but the release of *Woodstock* as well. Indeed the Altamont incident had already begun to direct cynicism and sadness toward the counterculture by the time that *Woodstock* was released. In an article published between the two releases entitled “Wood-stock-market” Gregg Barrios laments, “Woodstock stands out from where we are at because after Woodstock we had Altamont. And even though it speaks out against so much of the madness around us it is probably more apropos to call it LOVE IN VAIN which is the name of Maysles Bros. forthcoming film about Altamont and the Stones. Anyway, we’re talking about Woodstock and about Warner Bros. for whatever it’s worth.” Here Barrios is uniquely insightful in his industrial analysis of Warner Bros.’ profit at the grave of the dead counterculture. The company’s stake in presenting the film *Woodstock* as a memorial to the dead counterculture is evident not only in publicity materials, but also in a rather strange intertextual migration.

In 1971, just a year after *Woodstock* was released, the film resurfaces in *Omega Man*, a Warner Bros. sci-fi flick starring Charlton Heston
as a lone gunslinger making his way through a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles while fighting zombie-like humanoids who only come out at night. The film, set just a few years after its actual release date, bemoans the long gone era of Woodstock. The gun-slinging Heston enters a deserted theater, whose crumbling marquee announces *Woodstock*. An upended sandwich board in front of the theater utilizes the advertisement previously discussed and as Heston enters the theater he indicates that the film was playing at the time that biological warfare devastated the city three years prior, saying “Great show. Held over for a third straight year.” Heston watches a reel of the film in which Woodstock co-organizer Artie Kornfeld says that the significance of the festival is “Just to see it, just to really realize what’s really important. What’s really important is the fact that if we can’t all live together and be happy, if we have to be afraid to walk out in the street, if you have to be afraid to smile at somebody, right? What kind of a way is that to go through this life?” Alone in the dark theater, Heston recites along with him, afterward concluding, “Nope, they sure don’t make pictures like that anymore.” He then reluctantly reemerges into the desolation of the post-apocalyptic Los Angeles streets. Here dystopian Los Angeles stands in for the dystopian imagery of Altamont popularized by *Gimme Shelter* (and, unfortunately for Warner Bros., not in their back catalog). As a *Playboy* review summarized, “The hippies’ cherished myth of love and innocence dies hard, but die it does in *Gimme Shelter*, a vivid documentary that might as well be edged in black…” Similarly, a headline in the March 1971 issue of *Show* announced, “The Rolling Stones’ ‘Gimme Shelter’ Obituary For Woodstock Nation.” Statements like this one, as well as the discourse on Woodstock/Altamont in popular culture products like *Omega Man*, allow us to read the death of the counterculture back into the publicity stills discussed above. *Woodstock* comes to function as a memorial to the best and brightest possibilities of the counterculture, now deceased, while *Gimme Shelter* attends to a morbid fascination with its demise. In fact, *Gimme Shelter*’s popularity largely hinges on the self-reflexive moment at which the counter-culture comes face to face with its demise, via Mick Jagger.
MEDIA’S MARTYRS

The climax of *Gimme Shelter* arguably consists of the scene in which the Maysles brothers have Mick Jagger (and a few of his Rolling Stones bandmates) watch the footage of Meredith Hunter being stabbed in front of the stage at Altamont. After watching the footage, Jagger gets up from his seat at the flatbed and looks directly at the camera. The Maysles and Zwerin freeze frame this image and hold it for a few seconds (fig. 4). The image, which manifests what Joel Haycock has called “the burden of self-consciousness,” is highly ambiguous. Read by some as genuine shock and horror, by some as egotistical nonchalance, and by some as satanic remorselessness, the image becomes a marketing device in ads for the film’s theatrical re-release in 2000 and also graces the cover of the Criterion DVD release of the film (fig. 5). In its subsequent use the image is made darker and grainier, and Jagger’s face is transposed over a faint image of the Altamont crowd. The manipulated image suggests Jagger as the poster boy for the end of innocence in his relationship to the counterculture’s (and/or the sixties’) demise at Altamont.

Over the years, *Gimme Shelter* and *Woodstock* have been re-released a number of times, both theatrically and on video/DVD, often in conjunction with various “anniversaries” of the two events. The most notable *Woodstock* re-release, the debut of the director’s cut in 1994, was meant as a celebration of the festival’s 25th anniversary and was timed to coincide with Woodstock ’94, a copycat festival. One of *Gimme Shelter*’s most notable re-releases was in 2000 and not only coincided with the release of the Criterion DVD, but also followed closely on the heels of the disastrous Woodstock ’99, largely dubbed “Rapestock.” One critic went so far as to suggest that the re-release of *Gimme Shelter* was meant to secure Altamont’s status as the original festival-turned-nightmare lest this dubious honor be lost to an upstart. But more than merely capitalizing on the demarcated passage of time, what is perhaps most interesting about these re-releases is that they have worked to solidify and extend the tendencies that I have already discussed in relation to the films’ initial releases.

The subsequent releases of the *Woodstock* director’s cut and *Gimme Shelter*, in addition to relying on similar promotional strategies to those used at the time of their initial releases, also textually code the memorial and morbidity, respectively.
Woodstock does this through a reintroduction of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, arguably the best known deceased to appear on the Woodstock stage. While Hendrix did appear in the original film, his role in the director’s cut is expanded. His rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” not only accompanies the final shots of the film as the festival-goers leave, but also opens the film. As we hear the now canonized strains of his “Star Spangled Banner,” the film’s rating catches fire, a clear homage to Hendrix’s stage antics. The use of Hendrix as a framing device gives him a sort of authorship over the text when his role formerly seemed something of an afterthought. Meanwhile, the director’s cut restores Janis Joplin’s onstage performance, which was not part of the original release. Introduced specifically for the re-release, this footage seems constructed intentionally as a haunting memorial. While slow motion and split screen techniques are used throughout Woodstock, Joplin’s performance showcases these manipulations. Dancing in slow motion against a black background while her voice pleads “Don’t you leave…” she becomes a ghostly, ethereal figure. Uncharacteristic of the film, her performance is followed by a black frame which is held for many seconds while the audience’s applause resounds on the soundtrack over her absence.

Though Woodstock was already something of a memorial to the deceased rock stars that appeared on its stage, the re-release emphasizes this and even, after the credits, provides a curious conflation of the real deaths of the film’s stars and the death of the counterculture as previously discussed. The curious final shot of the re-release, which I feel justified in calling a “death scroll,” begins with a fade out from an image of the Woodstock crowd in which they become a sort of façade over which a list of prominent, now deceased, countercultural representatives (including Hendrix and Joplin) scrolls. Expanding out from these “real” deaths, the scroll ends by memorializing countercultural values such as “peace,” “ecology,” “community,” and “democracy.” The scroll concludes, in capital letters, “WOODSTOCK GENERATION 19** - 20** R.I.P.” However, as a sort of postscript, it continues to scroll so that “R.I.P.” becomes the first term in “R.I.P. it up, Tear it up, [and] have a ball” by way of the film and its enormous following. Nowhere in the original or re-released versions of Woodstock is its memorial function more directly drawn. The death scroll is particularly interesting in that by listing names over the darkened image of the crowd, which approximates the look of black marble, it quite literally references established United States memorials, including the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.20

The re-release of Gimme Shelter similarly works to emphasize its initial focus as a document of demise made for those curious about the real and figurative death the film depicts. Without adding new footage, the 2000 release (on film and DVD) emphasizes restoration.21 By celebrating its fidelity to Altamont’s sounds and images, the film’s restoration recalls André Bazin’s plea to assess photography on the basis of its “power to lay bare the realities.”22 Always playing on the hermeneutics of death, the film is now able to provide curious onlookers with a more faithful reproduction of the
MEDIA’S MARTYRS

horrific murder of Meredith Hunter and the hurt, hate, and chaos surrounding the incident...which brings us back to Jacques Attali.

In his chapter on repetition, Attali argues that the function of recording is pure, meaningless repetition. However, as I have demonstrated here, cinema’s function vis-à-vis rock music harkens back in some respects to the era of representation, which Attali sees as imbued with abstract and symbolic relationships between music and society. _Woodstock_ and _Gimme Shelter_ preserve the respective festivals that they record not only so that they might be mindlessly and repetitively viewed and listened to, but so that they may be understood and appreciated – for a profit of course. If one were inclined to believe Attali’s prediction that in a political economy of repetition death would become, essentially, meaningless, one need only look at the theatrical rental figures for _Woodstock_ and _Gimme Shelter_.

Death can only make for an effective marketing tactic when it means something to potential consumers. The consumer’s affective relationship to death, whether it be mourning or morbid fear, allows death to assume a use value which is at the crux of what I am calling the political economy of death. What I hope to have shown here, in the context of the “Deaths of Cinema” conference is that death, real and figurative, may in fact help to keep cinema, and for that matter rock music, alive.

Laurel Westrup is a PhD candidate in the Critical Studies in Film, Television, and Digital Media program at UC Los Angeles. Her dissertation will explore what she terms the “political economy of death” in relation to rock music performance in film and television. In addition to her work on the relationship between music and the moving image media, her research interests include diasporic filmmaking and reception, media convergence and new approaches to feminist media theory.

Notes


3. See, for instance, Alex Constantine’s _The Covert War Against Rock_ (Venice, CA: Feral House, 2000).

4. In _Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture_ (London: Routledge, 1999), Auslander uses “mediatization” to refer to the representation of a person/action in the media as opposed to “mediation,” which does not necessarily refer to the media.


6. In a section of the “Repeating” chapter entitled “Stockpiling Death” Attali prophesizes that “people will collect means for killing themselves (happy, sad, solitary, collective, distant or with the family, painless or after torture, in public or in private). To my mind, this sign will be the ultimate expression of the code of possession. It is inevitable, I think, that this commercialization of death, represented in the commodity and stockpiled in the repetitive economy, will come to pass in the next thirty years.” Attali, 126.


18. Haycock, 59. I find Haycock’s phrase highly suggestive in the way that it speaks to the “mediatization” of rock culture with the rise of the concert film in the mid-to-late 1960s. *Gimme Shelter* brings out the dystopian possibilities of the concert film’s ability to allow (or perhaps force) rock fans and bands to reflect on themselves. In the *Woodstock/Gimme Shelter* diad, the possibility of representing rock music and its culture arguably becomes both a blessing (in the form of memorialization) and a curse (in the form of morbid fascinations/obsessions).

19. See Craig Modderno’s article “Altamont Revisited” in New Times Los Angeles (Dec. 16-22, 1999): 74. The subtitle to Modderno’s article reads “The violence at Woodstock ’99 inspired cynics to dub it “Rapestock,” but 30 years ago this month, the Love Generation had its own festival of hate.”

20. My comparison of the “death scroll” to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is certainly not accidental. However, the relationship between the Vietnam War, the hippie counterculture, rock music, and film is highly complex and unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. For a highly nuanced treatment of this relationship, see David James’ essay “Rock and Roll in Representations of the Invasion of Vietnam.” *Representations* 29 (Winter 1990): 78-98.

21. For instance, an ad which ran in *LA Weekly* on September 1, 2000 included a prominent box which announced “New 35 mm restoration, Dolby Digital sound.”

22. Bazin, 15.