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## Chapter 4. Out of sight: the mediation of the music festival

*The children danced night and day.*  
Eric Burdon, *Monterey*<sup>1</sup>

The pop festival grows from nothing; it rises up from an empty space into an audio-visual spectacle, captivating the thousands of individuals who have made the pilgrimage to witness it. Over the years these musical staged events, with a strong visual dimension, have attracted media producers, especially film-makers. This chapter explores how the pop festival has been mediated over time, from the early pioneering films of music festivals through to the modern festival. I wish to discuss how the pop festival was mediated (focussing on film, the most ‘remediated’<sup>2</sup> form of media), with an examination of the techniques and methods used by media producers. But I also want to discuss this in relation to the actual music offered at these festivals. Much analysis of the pop music festival concentrates, perhaps understandably, on the socio-political function of the festival. This is important, but neglects to address the principal reason people flock to these festivals and later consume mediated versions of these festivals; namely, their passion for modern popular musical forms.

The story of the mediation of the pop festival appears to have followed the following somewhat familiar trajectory:

- 1) Life (the birth of the festival film)
- 2) Death (the trauma of the mediated festival)
- 3) Rebirth (a new form of mediation/remediation)

Socially and culturally speaking, the relationship between the mass media and festivals centres on reportage of the events. For the big festivals of the 1960s and 1970s media provided coverage of festivals as news dwelling especially on local fears and apprehensions about the influx of hippies, freaks and undesirables (as seen in the interviews opening the 1970 *Woodstock* film (Wadleigh 1970). The predictable reactionary and inconsistent messages were sent out by the mass media in regard to festivals. For example, the newspaper coverage of the Woodstock festival ‘flipped’ from August 16, 1969 when the *New York Times* described the festival as ‘an outrageous episode’ (and in the UK *The Times* asked ‘what kind of culture is it that can produce so colossal a mess?’) to the day after when the *New York Times* suddenly viewed Woodstock as ‘essentially a phenomenon of innocence’ and even as ‘a

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<sup>1</sup> The song *Monterey* was recorded in 1967 by Eric Burdon and the Animals and was written by Eric Burdon, John Weider, Vic Briggs, Danny McCulloch, and Barry Jenkins. Lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> See *Remediation: Understanding New Media* by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (MIT: 2000). Bolter and Grusin argue that, through the imperatives of *hypermediacy* and *immediacy*, new media achieve their cultural significance by paying homage to, rivalling, and refashioning such earlier media as painting, photography, film, and television.

declaration of independence” (Peterson 1973, 110-111; see also Warner 2004). In one prescient interview with a participant at the 1970 Isle of Wight festival the (female) interviewee said that the festival as a whole was a ‘bummer’ but one that ‘would look better in the movie’ (quoted in Peterson 1973, 111). As Peterson notes, ‘the media did not act as a neutral mirror but played an active role in shaping everyone’s view of reality’ (Peterson 1973, 116). This is what we see suggested in the above Isle of Wight quotation. Festivals, live music, their promise of authenticity and community, are the ultimate realisation of ‘the Bowie theory’: the performance of music becoming the ‘only unique situation that’s going to be left’ (Kreuger, quoted in Frith 2007, 6).

It is clear that the mediation of the music festival enhances the already spectacular nature of the event. Writing in the early days of festival, Richard Peterson defined music festivals as ‘multi-day gatherings of diverse people drawn together to participate in a particular form of music and share a communal spirit in which the world was momentarily remade in the image celebrated in the music’ (1973, 99). This dimension of the music festival, has been much discussed; these so-called ‘gatherings of the tribe’ and the way in which these large-scale collective events, at least in the late 1960s and early 1970s, seemed to shape the times they existed in<sup>3</sup>. The actual ‘Gathering of the Tribes’ festival, otherwise known as the Human Be-In, held in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, in 1967, was said to be ‘the prototype of all 1960s counter culture celebrations’<sup>4</sup>. Those fortunate enough to have been to these festivals have a particular story to tell (and increasingly tell it: see the very low quality but extensive packaging and promotional materials documenting the Bickershaw Festival in England in 1972, for example)<sup>5</sup>.

Since the 1960s, audio-visual media have played an increasingly important role in the understanding of the rock festival. It seems as if only the audio-visual spectacle of the feature film, the vibrancy of the film image mixed with a high-impact soundtrack, was capable of capturing what Richard Barsam defines as the ‘state of mind’ of these seismic events (Barsam 1992: 332). Julie Lobalzo Wright shows how the connection between performer and audience is developed in films such as *Woodstock* (where there is a sense of unity) and *Gimme Shelter* (a sense of alienation). Either way, the ‘communal gaze and ‘disconnecting gaze’ inform a cinematic audience of the power of contemporary rock music (Wright 2013: 73). Arnold argues that the importance of the *Woodstock* film as a ‘mainstay of the rock business’s sense of cultural relevance... cannot be understated’ (Arnold 2014: 129). The film’s lavish visual style and rich presentation of a range of musical styles continues to resonate into the twenty-first century. Those left behind, or too young to have been there, experience the festival via the festival film, or the live broadcast of the event, increasingly being beamed to cinema spaces in theatres or city centres. For example, comparing the way in which the Glastonbury Festival has been mediated over the decades we can see a classic cinematic representation of the festival in 1971

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<sup>3</sup> See for example *Barefoot in Babylon: the Creation of the Woodstock Music Festival, 1969* by Robert Stephen Spitz (Viking Press, 1979); *Woodstock Nation* by Abbie Hoffman (Vintage, 1969) and *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s* by P. Braunstein and P.W Doyle (eds) (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> *Magic Bus* website ( <http://magicbussf.com/january-14-1967-the-human-be-in-aka-gathering-of-the-tribes-golden-gate-park/>

<sup>5</sup> *The Bickershaw Festival*, DVD, Ozit, Dir: Tom and Chris Hewitt (2007).

(Nicholas Roeg and Peter Neal's *Glastonbury Fayre*), carefully and skilfully structured after the event, based on materials collected at the time, with the BBC's live streaming of the festival, across multiple media platforms, that has become a ubiquitous contemporary aspect both of the festival itself, and of the BBC's summer scheduling. Both are fragmentary (and necessarily so, given that a complete film/broadcast of the festival would require around three *continuous* days of broadcast/cinematic time), but in different ways. The skills and the produced text of a post-event edit process and a live television mix differ widely. As with the approach to the visualisation of music in other festival films of the time (such as Wadleigh's *Woodstock*), 'these were essentially musical events: the cameras engaged in reportage, the musicians primarily engaged in the live delivery of their music' (Edgar et al 2013, 3). In the 'TV Glastonbury', in place of the anonymous voices of the MC heard on older films, excitable professional presenters shape our experience (often not for the better). There is also a point here to be made about the hierarchy of media production: for D.A. Pennebaker, the director of the classic 1968 festival film *Monterey Pop*, television would 'demean any subject like this' (Pennebaker 2006).

But how did the mediated form of music festival come about? In order to understand the now common filmic representation of the pop festival, we must look at the mediation of an event that was not even really 'pop': the Newport Jazz Festival of 1958.

### ***Jazz on a Summer's Day: a taxonomy of the festival film***

The Newport Jazz Festival, held in the small US state of Rhode Island, was established in 1954 by socialites Elaine and Louis Lorillard. Despite periodic crises, it still runs every summer, even if, according to the 2014 website, it is 'presented by Natixis Global Asset Management', and thus has arguably lost some of its hip credentials. In truth, the festival was always a magnet for an elite East Coast crowd of hipsters, providing entertainment for the yachting crowds gathering during the holiday season. For the 1958 festival a young fashion photographer named Bert Stern was assigned the task of recording the festival on colour film. Stern worked with director Aram Avakian who also edited the film. Stern's production utilised five cameras simultaneously. As a photographer, Stern knew to make use of high quality handheld cameras with telephoto lenses, and made exceptional use of 35mm Kodak fast positive-reversal colour film. Stern remarked on reflection that his images 'just jumped off the screen'. Stern also noted that, in the cultural tradition of the time, 'jazz films are all black and white ... kind of depressing and in little downstairs nightclubs. This brought jazz out into the sun. It was different' (quoted in Kurtz 2010).

*Jazz on a Summer's Day* (first public screening in 1959) is a visually remarkable film, and the politics of its representations have been widely discussed. Thomas F. Cohen, for example, carefully argues that Stern's representation of black performers on the film is flawed and reactionary (Cohen 2012). The film poorly documents the emerging radical jazz performers and the politics of new black consciousness (evidence of this for Cohen is that Thelonious Monk's performance is

truncated and broken up by endless cut-aways).<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Stern unwittingly created a blueprint for all subsequent representations of pop festival films, and it is this that I think is worth discussing further. Because of Stern's training as a photographer he emphasised image rather than sound (the 'glaring omissions' of the film in terms of the performing artists actually excluded are listed with the jazz critic's zeal in Kurtz 2010). Therefore, what Cohen sees as faulty with the way in which Stern cuts away from the performers to external elements of the festival (birds, water, yachts) is actually one of *Jazz on a Summer's Day's* most exciting dimensions. In particular, Stern's restless lens captured fragments of the festival experience that would very quickly become standard within the repertoire of visualisation of the festival in film. Here are some of those key features from *Jazz on a Summer's Day*.

### ***The face in the crowd***

At various points in the film, Stern trains his camera on the audience members. My own perception as a viewer is that the audience for the Newport Jazz Festival is given as much screen time as the music acts. Concentration and focus on capturing the subjects of the festival was paramount. This was the first film to locate the beautiful people of the festival crowd. At various points, Stern picks out attractive young women, both black and white (something again Cohen argues is problematic), but also shown are men in button-down shirts and pork pie hats. A particularly striking image is that of a young woman in a red sweater wearing a straw-hat with a matching red trim (see Fig.1). The colour of the Kodak process picks out these hues in rich and vibrant measure. During the edit process Avakian, argued that there should be cross-cutting between the red-sweater woman and the performers, but Stern insisted that the single long shot of the woman be retained, a clear indication that his style was impressionistic rather than dynamic (now the standard form of editing for pop festival media) (Stern 2001). This improvised style raises questions for music fans of 'authenticity'. Cohen (2012), for example, is critical of Bert Stern's cutting to shots of racing yachts during the performers' key solos. These small details are what make the film so fascinating.

Fig.1 *Jazz on a Summer's Day*. The woman in the red sweater.

### ***The face of God***

Stern's filming of jazz performers, for all its apparent flaws, captures the mystical dimension of the performing artist. By scrutinising in close-up the faces of performers in action, *Jazz on a Summer's Day* invites the audience of the film to gaze in awe at their technical prowess and ability to captivate a crowd. The 'bad positioning' common to the early festival films, where there was no concession made to where the film camera could operate, forced film-makers to improvise and adapt and make good use of their lenses and of the cramped and claustrophobic locations. This film was the first cinematic work to invite us to take the popular music performer seriously as an artist and to appreciate the skill involved in making such music. Associations can be

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<sup>6</sup> Intriguingly, in the context of an argument that festival is mediated and re-represented via the film of the event, there are other examples of the festival film *getting it wrong*, or *misrepresenting* the event. This was a criticism of Murray Lerner's 1967 film *Festival!*, when David Pirie accused the film-makers of 'complete indifference' to Bob Dylan's infamous electric performance (Pirie 1971, 141).

made between the performer and the audience. This happens most notably where during a solo by saxophonist Sonny Stitt, the contours of his instrument are matched with those of the figure of a young woman in the audience. Thus the era of performers as ‘demigods’ (Gordon, 1970: 41) is launched.

### *The face of the filmmaker*

Stern creates several sequences in the film that are staged reality. These include a group of festival-goers enjoying a party in one of the houses they have rented; a sequence of the jazz group Eli’s Chosen Six riding along the road in an old jalopy, and a record of Chic Hamilton’s group rehearsing in another rented property. Another memorable moment occurs when Stern shows, via a candid camera position, Anita O’Day picking something off the sole of her shoe before stepping on stage. These sections break up the illusion of reality easily created by sequences of performers on stage. Stern was not afraid to reveal that this record of the Newport Jazz Festival was a cinematic and photographic creation. The subsequent authentic approach of the Direct Cinema directors was not yet fully evident.

In my view, the enduring creative innovation of *Jazz on a Summer’s Day* was the profound linking of bodies with music and sound. The film was structured, in the shooting but also the editing of the film, so as to connect the sounds being made by the musicians with the movement of the performers and also the audience creating a kind of symbiosis. As Cohen points out, when discussing the performance of Sonny Stitt, in this film there is an audio-visually induced ‘analogy between horn and woman’ (Cohen 2012: 31). This device, the drawing together of bodies in movement (both audience and performer) and the properties of musical sound, would continue well into the further development of the pop festival film, becoming a ritual aspect of the festival film.

### **Festival films and the mediation of the counterculture**

The media projected Woodstock.

George Paul Csicsery (Eisen, 1970: 234)

If one were asked to name a good example of the pop festival film two particular examples would immediately spring to mind. The first is *Monterey Pop* (1968), directed by D.A. Pennbaker; the second *Woodstock* (1970) directed by Michael Wadleigh.. The reasons these films became and have remained archetypes of the pop festival film are less to do with the fact they occurred within the over-garlanded ‘golden era’ of rock and pop music (which loosely begins with the breakthrough of The Beatles and ends with the arrival in 1976 of punk rock) and more to do with the vivid power of the cinematic art form. *Woodstock* and *Monterey Pop* are defined as documentary records of these festivals but are rendered according to a particular form of documentary film: Direct Cinema. D.A. Pennebaker, the director of *Monterey Pop*, was in fact, along with Robert Drew, one of the pioneers of this form of raw and intuitive form of cinema. The pioneering film-makers of direct cinema believed in the “spontaneous, uncontrolled and cinematic recording of important events, issues and personalities” (Barsam, 1992: 305) and combined the traditional documentary film with journalism to create this exciting new form. The direct cinema mode is characterised aesthetically by “indirect address, the use of long takes and synchronous

sound...spatiotemporal continuity rather than montage” all designed to evoke a strong feeling of being in the “present tense” (Renov, 2004: 174). The most striking elements of these pop festival films were developed in earlier documentary films such as *Primary* (1960), *Salesman* (1969) and Pennebaker’s *Don’t Look Back* (1967), a record of Bob Dylan’s 1965 UK tour. The aesthetics were defined by new lightweight film cameras and portable sound equipment and a desire to represent ‘reality’, with as little manipulation as was possible. The point of Direct Cinema, to capture the moment via a hand-held camera aesthetic, was developed in such films, even when matched with devices such as triple-screen effects, led to the creation of a definitely rewarding experience (‘even when it’s boring ... it’s not boring’, Mark Sinker said of *Woodstock*; 1994, 55). Another reason that this form of cinema has continued to resonate is that it draws on literary models in combining documentary realism with a strong sense of drama (Truman Capote’s infamous *In Cold Blood*, an evocative retelling of a set of gruesome and senseless murders in Kansas in 1959, is a good example of the kinds of texts the Direct Cinema producers were trying to emulate). Also critical is a continuation of the ‘cinematic’ techniques developed by Stern in *Jazz on a Summer’s Day*, such as extensive use of split-screen, freeze-frame and extreme long-shot focus.. Like Antonioni’s influential *Blow Up* (1966), all these films makes protracted use of running frames so slowly that they become still images. In particular the authenticity of the direct nature of the documentary festival films seemed to stand in opposition to the existing manufactured films of the rock’n’roll and pop era (Cliff Richard’s films or The Beatles’ 1964 film *A Hard Day’s Night*, for example). *Woodstock*, and its ilk, were then, a ‘product of the mass media’ (Loss, 1998: 134).

It is useful to remember when discussing pop festival films that they are audio-visual art forms. While it is tempting to dwell on the visual dimension of the films we must acknowledge the importance of ‘cinema sound’ to the overall effect. After all, these films are about music as much as visual aesthetics and cultural politics. It is clear that successful festival films have not let the images ‘get in the way’ of the music but have instead offered a *symbiosis* of sound and image. Think of the astonishing early footage of Richie Havens in *Woodstock* where the driving beat of his percussive guitar and the accompanying conga drums is accentuated with extreme almost abstract close-up shots of his feet and hands. We can also detect a more or less *synaesthetic* experience in the sequence of Otis Redding, in *Monterey Pop*, particularly his rendition of the song ‘I’ve been loving you too long’, where at one point the coloured stage lighting floods the camera (which is shooting *into* the light), overpowering the figure of Redding, who is glimpsed in silhouette (see Fig.2). At this moment we lose the image of the star singer, but the music and sound is arguably enhanced by the abstraction and fragmentation of the image. In the same film there is the spectacle of Hendrix playing ‘Wild thing’, one of his most famous songs. Cohen describes this performance as ‘carnavalesque’ (2012, 40) and its power derives from the coming together of visually striking images and, in sound terms, a disturbing wall of noise.

Fig. 2 *Monterey Pop*. Otis Redding

The sacramental nature of the pop festival was indicated in *Glastonbury Fayre*, the film of the 1971 free festival at Glastonbury. In this film it is not only the

music of the stage performers that is foregrounded but also that of the crowd. The participation of the audience in the festival film is again critical. A memorable sequence of the film seeks to reinforce the mystical nature of the communion between music and some kind of higher or other power, unsurprisingly given that the choice of festival location in the first place was concerned with ‘tapp[ing] into the emerging zeitgeist of Aquarian and later New Age ideals’ (McKay 2000, 59). This is the performance of Arthur Brown and Kingdom Come who has placed a series of burning crosses at the front of the stage, and the set begins with explosions of fireworks. The footage of Brown in action is preceded by images of a group of festival-goers climbing Glastonbury Tor to St Michael’s tower in search of a good position to watch the sunrise. Suddenly we see a shot of the moon, wreathed in clouds. Then cut in is a brief interview with Bill Harkin, the designer of the famous pyramid stage. ‘I could see the audience dematerialise in front of me’, he observes (see Fig.3). Any sense of temporal continuity here is abandoned (Arthur Brown’s performance is clearly unfolding at night) in favour of a recreation of a sacred musical happening.

Fig.3 *Glastonbury Fayre*. Bill Harkin’s vision

What these moments in countercultural films like *Monterey Pop* and *Glastonbury Fayre* seek to attain is an element of the transcendental (see Goodall 2013), the audience moving beyond simply observing the festival unfold but becoming immersed in the revolutionary or spiritual nature of the epoch, through the audio-visual experience. The *vérité* nature of the countercultural pop festival film, and Direct Cinema is revelatory. The fragmentary shots (for example the reduction of the image to single, crawling freeze-frames) are not the spectacular images expected of today’s mediated festival experience (which seem to confirm what Peterson predicted in 1973 as a trend to ‘gigantism’) (Peterson, 1973, 102). They are removed from the curse of the director’s cut, or from something like the gimmicky facility for DVD viewers to be able to re-mix the festival film to suit their own tastes offered in Julien Temple’s 2006 documentary about Glastonbury (Temple 2006). The music as delivered in festival films may lack any clear narrative or any sense of the ‘motives’ (Cohen 2012, 10) of the characters involved (and in any case Direct Cinema founder Robert Drew once claimed that ‘narration is what you do when you fail’: Drew 1996, 273). Instead, these festival films ultimately leave a strong impression due to the ‘transformative power of the cinematic vision’ (Rust 2011, 51).

Gordon (1970) argues there were two tendencies in the 1960s American festivals, which we can see reflected in the media reportage of these events. The first is the revival of the May or spring festivals where renewed fertility of nature is celebrated. Gordon relates this particularly to *Woodstock*, with its ‘back to the garden’ sensibility (as Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young sang of in their version of Joni Mitchell’s ‘Woodstock’), a ‘return to the pastoral’ (Gordon 1970, 44), and we can also see it re-enacted in near-contemporaneous films such as *Glastonbury Fayre*. The second tendency is the simulation of the Lord of Misrule where sacrilegious rites are performed in order to disrupt the social order and to mock authority. Such drives are a ‘sanctioned release for anarchic and satanic impulses’ (Gordon 1970, 32). We can trace the change that took place in part by comparing the appearances by Jimi Hendrix in *Monterey Pop*, where his notorious ‘spectacular’ performance (incorporating simulated sexual intercourse with his guitar, pyrotechnics—setting his

guitar on fire, and destruction—the smashing of his guitar), with that in *Woodstock*, where a flat, low-key, mournful set (featuring his improvised rendition of ‘The star-spangled banner’) is captured by Wadleigh himself in a single, four-minute abstract take. It is tempting to deduce from this that the end of the film *Woodstock* captured the end of the sixties dream. Yet, for Gordon, writing in 1970 and touched by the lament of the moment, the decade anyway ‘was coming to a close’ becoming a ‘paradise lost’ (Gordon 1970, 70).

The most obvious cinematic example of this second tendency is *Gimme Shelter* (1970), a film by Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, chronicling the last weeks of The Rolling Stones’ 1969 US tour which culminated in the disastrous free concert given by the group in northern California. At this event, official titled The Altamont Speedway Free Festival, Hell’s Angels were invited to act as the security, and a festival-goer was murdered in front of the stage as the band played. Grainy footage captures the death on film. Whereas the Aquarian Age of the Woodstock generation appear to have been captured by the film camera in the way it focuses on the ideology of free love and peace, with frequent interviews with the crowd and organisers (as Tim Lucas notes, the real stars of Woodstock are the audience: ‘[a]t least they’re searching’: 2009, 88), *Gimme Shelter* focuses on the business of The Rolling Stones and the ultimate tragedy of a rock group playing with satanic impulses in order to shock and to sell records and merchandise (what Stephen Mamber calls ‘the continuing exploitation ... of *cinéma vérité* for the purpose of making publicity films about rock stars’: 1973, 15). The form of Direct Cinema, unmediated and raw, ideally rendered the disturbing aspects unfolding at Altamont, and projected the dark side of the 1960s. In this way a simple documentary film was able to conjure up the spirit of the end of the 1960s dream, an atmosphere described by Joan Didion as typified by a “demented and seductive vortical tension” (Didion, 2009: 41-42).

Fig.4 *Gimme Shelter*. Charlie Watts listens.

Powerful media representations of festivals combine the aesthetics of new technologies with another critical element: the role of (spectacular) performance. Performance here of course refers to the performance of bands on stage (as captured by the camera), but also to the performative nature of film itself—something Direct Cinema directors thrived on. A well-known example of this occurs in the opening of *Gimme Shelter* where Rolling Stones drummer Charlie Watts is filmed sitting at the Steenbeck edit machine listening to audio of the chaos of the Altamont concert (see Fig.4). Later in the film Mick Jagger is also shown viewing the footage, notably the sequence capturing the murder of Meredith Hunter. Rust focuses on the way in which direct cinema techniques (especially the freeze-frame and slow motion) in this film reflect back to the audience the ‘artificiality’ of the film process thus combining, paradoxically, ‘spontaneity’ (a live event) with ‘contingency’ (the re-construction of that event in the studio) (Rust 2011: 49). As Taylor argues, ‘film-makers and audiences alike have a contiguous relationship with the space that is represented on screen, and an existential bond with the social actors who exist in the same world as they do’ (Taylor 2001: 47). Frith discussed the live performance aspect of festivals as an ‘abstract ideal’. We can ask though how this plays out with the older films? In *Jazz on a Summer’s Day*, and *Woodstock* for example, the performative dimension to the

films is of course mediated and constructed in the edit suite, and abstract. Yet this is often of most thrilling dimensions of the film experience. The effect of ‘being there’ cannot be fully re-created despite recent attempts (see below); it is audio-visual spectacle that is key, and therefore this complex relationship between the original performers, film directors and audiences (both for the festival and the media representation) is of critical importance in making the festival film successful as a work of art.

Some critics, for example Kael (1970) and Peterson (1973) have argued that the tone and mood of *Gimme Shelter* was shaped by the film crew and The Rolling Stones colluding together. At Altamont the Rolling Stones allegedly waited until it was dark to create a dramatic and dangerous mood and so that the film crew could get good lighting, “bright colours and deep shadows” (Peterson, 1973: 109). Thus the media spectacle of the film *Gimme Shelter* had a key role in creating the horror. Peterson claims that “the confrontation scene at Altamont was created and fed at each stage by the pressure to produce a film in spite of everything”. Amos Vogel, writing in general about death on screen, paid particular attention to the frames of *Gimme Shelter*: “It is your unconscious perception of the gap between actuality and invention that gives the accidentally filmed knife murder of the black spectator in...*Gimme Shelter* such tremendous power”. We are “caught in the sweet and deadly trap of the voyeur” (Vogel 1974: 263)

Ultimately, the claims of the countercultural festival film are exaggerated. Peter argues that “Pop festivals may be the dinosaurs of the Age of Aquarius, and they may have eaten or drugged themselves into extinction, but Altamont was not the be-all and end-all of the youth culture” (Buckley 1971: 37). Other writers have argued that false mediated representations festivals destroyed their power. Festivals were “rapidly overexposed...perhaps killed by overexposure” (Gordon, 1970: 44).

### **The contemporary mediated festival**

While it is arguable that festival media (in the form of the subsequent films and records of live performances) have always been about making money—whether as a further profit stream or a late effort to cover losses—the grandest of the modern festivals have become about expansion of economies of scale across the board, from crowd size on (even in 2007 the audience at Glastonbury Festival numbered 175,000). Simon Frith defines the modern festival as ‘a key asset in the portfolios of the international corporations now dominating concert promotion’ (Frith 2007, 4). Exclusive media deals and extensive television coverage helps this, as does the recent popularisation of cinema screenings of live performances.

The editing of films like *Woodstock* (by Thelma Schoonmaker and Martin Scorsese) and *Monterey Pop* did not aim simply record the events but, according to Tim Lucas, even sought to explore ‘the consciousness of its audience and times’ (Lucas 2009: 88 ). But while some aspects of the ‘classic’ festival film endure (the presentation of the crowd as the star; the spectacle of the stage) the contemporary festival film differs in important ways from the earlier examples. In place of the impressionism of *Jazz on a Summer’s Day*, and the abstraction of *Woodstock* and *Monterey Pop*, the pace of cuts in modern films is now dictated by the editorial

practice developed from the music video from the 1980s on and reveals, if you like, the MTV aesthetic. Further, while this partly reflects changes in musical forms (the long improvisations common in jazz and the experimental fugues of psychedelic rock encouraging a more languid and reflective series of edit choices in the earlier films), it is also dictated by production shifts in television and the internet (now the primary media for the consumption of the festival film). At the same time, critics have argued that the post-cinematic mediation of the pop festival has not improved on the so-called artificiality of film. Keith Negus, for example, writes of the way in which performers, musicians and composers saw television as a 'natural lens, rather than a transformative medium that can redefine, or develop, innovative types of musical performance' (Negus, 2006: 314)

That said, consumers of the festival film still want to get lost in music. The modern jazz audiences in *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, and the rock and folk fans in *Woodstock*, find their echo in the modern rave film, where still the intent is to allow the audio-visual experience to return them to, or immerse them in, the total festival experience. But I wonder whether documentaries about new festivals are effectively extended promotion and marketing tools. The claim for an Electronic Dance Music (EDM) film such as *Under the Electric Sky* (2014) is that 'the fans are the headliners', while in the similar *Electric Daisy Carnival Experience* (2011) parallels are articulated with earlier festivals: the event 'was really mystical', says one attendee onscreen; for another it was 'a *Woodstock* moment ... something changed' (Kerslake, 2011). Yet serious critical reception of EDM festival films has been muted. Even the special 3D presentation of *Under the Electric Sky*, like the 'vapid' (Harvey, 2014) music it extolled, was seemingly bereft of any genuine countercultural depth. According to the *Variety* review following its screening at Sundance Film Festival in 2014, the film

provides lots of sexy, neon-hued eye-candy but not many images of deeper resonance. Bookended by flat sequences (before and after the festival), the 3D format surprisingly isn't exploited all that effectively in Reed Smoot's otherwise accomplished lensing. Other tech/design contributions are top-shelf, and of course the sound mix is ace. Still, if ever a movie begged for revival of butt-rumbling 1970s theater gimmick Sensurround, it's *Under the Electric Sky* with its incessant audio orgasms of thumping bass. (Harvey, 2014)

The DJ, even a superstar DJ, is visually less interesting on film than the pop or rock performer who, with their dynamic movement and freedom to roam the performance space, always 'brings the body back into the line of sight' (Cohen 2012: 21).

The festival films discussed above illustrate the complexities of the representations being formed both in the production of these films, and the reception of the films, upon immediate release, and with hindsight many years later. Gina Arnold has argued that there is a 'paradox' at the core of films like *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter*; that such films want to be a conventional documentary about the workings of rock music, and at the same time a rejection of traditional aesthetic, political and social values (Arnold, 2014: 134). Arnold argues that our understanding of these countercultures is 'entirely imaginary' (Ibid, 136) and it is clear that these filmic representations play a part in that myth-making fantasy. Films such as *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter* offer the viewer a 'reshaped idea of the commodity as something not necessarily

material...an aura, a feeling' (Ibid 137). Perhaps that is their appeal? However, I wish to conclude that despite the potential faults of these festival films, they still inspire a sense for the viewer of the potential revolutionary aspects of rock festivals, rock music and the media representations of this explosive combination. It is wrong to simply argue, as Frith has done (Frith 1981: 164), that the music is not an important part of the rock festival; that the sociology of the festival is its sole purpose. Live music was the reason audiences flocked to festivals in the past and why audiences continue to flock to festivals today. It is the effectiveness of truly creative music, the sound and the affect, that ultimately inspires successful documentary films; films that people continue, in the twenty-first century, to want to watch.

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