

SAM GREEN

Born 1966, Detroit, Michigan
Lives and works in San Francisco, California

WE KNOW HIS NAME WAS MEREDITH HUNTER. He was the eighteen-year-old African American victim of the infamous stabbing by a member of the Hells Angels at the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont Speedway in 1969 whose murder was captured on film and recounted in the documentary *Gimme Shelter*. The milieu around this stabbing—rock and roll, youth culture, drugs, and spirited idealism gone awry—was mined extensively in the media, which boisterously proclaimed his tragic death as the end of an era of hope and idealism.

Nowhere in any news accounts of the day was the background story of Meredith Hunter told; even with the intense public scrutiny of the circumstances of his death, no media outlets delved into his life. There were no quotes from neighbors or teachers, no image of his bereft family members, no description of the stylish clothes he wore to the concert... nothing. This absence of information would be inconceivable today, with our collective insatiable appetite for the details, however mundane, prurient, or insignificant, of a person's life.

The lack of media microscoping of Meredith Hunter's life becomes even more poignant given the dull, sad absence of any physical marker of his death—a fact at the core of Sam Green's documentary *lot 63, grave c* (2006). Meredith Hunter's body, we learn, lies in a lonely unmarked burial site at lot 63, grave c, at Skyview Memorial Lawn cemetery in East Vallejo, California. Lawn sprinklers issuing shots of water over wilted daisies are nearly the only signs of life in this otherwise quiet place. Counting out paces to the head of the unmarked grave, the cemetery's funeral director stands silently for a moment on the spot where the marker for lot 63, grave c, would go. His small gesture becomes a kind of brief, solitary memorial, and we become witnesses to this forgotten memory. Capturing that simple act on video, Sam Green offers up a tender elegy—perhaps the only one in existence—to Meredith Hunter.

Like other documentary works by Sam Green, *lot 63, grave c* revisits another era by weaving archival images and found footage with contemporary interviews, insight, and analysis to create complex portrayals and subtle critiques of contemporary culture and values. In *The Rainbow Man/John 3:16* (1997) Green recounts the tragic story of Rollen Stewart, who gained notoriety after appearing at countless televised sporting events in the 1970s while wearing a rainbow-colored wig and carrying a placard that read "John 3:16." *Pie Fight '69* (2000) unearths lost footage from a group of radicals who interrupted the gala premiere of the San Francisco Film Festival. Green's documentary *The Weather Underground* (2002), codirected with Bill Siegel, was nominated for an Academy Award in 2004.

Irene Tsatsos

SAM GREEN: THE LINE BETWEEN FICTION AND NONFICTION IS BLURRIER THAN MOST PEOPLE THINK
by Mike Plante

CINEMAD: Did you always want to make documentaries?

SAM GREEN: I never went to film school, but I did study journalism at UC [University of California] Berkeley, and Marlon Riggs, the documentary maker, taught there, so I studied documentaries with him, but it was all video. I never learned how to do film or anything. He was awesome. I got a Master's degree. When I went there, I wanted to be a newspaper reporter, but then I took this video class and it was really fun, and writing was so lonely. I wasn't even that good at it. I would spend super long hours in front of a computer alone, being frustrated. And video, to me, was so much more fun and collaborative. After I took that class I changed direction.

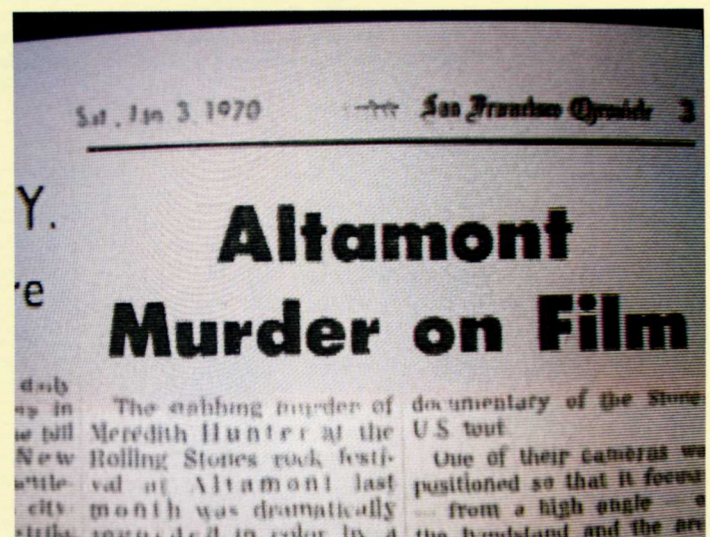
What did he show in class? He showed all sorts of stuff. He was great because he, in a lot of ways, sort of showed me a direction that I wanted to go and ended up going in, which was both a real rigorous journalistic approach, but at the same time, kind of an experimental impulse as well. I had not been super into film before that, and I saw some things there that really knocked me out and opened my eyes, like *Sans Soleil* [1983] by Chris Marker. Or *Salesman* by Albert and David Maysles [1968]. Seeing those movies kind of opened my eyes to this whole world that I really got sucked into, I guess.

Did you make *The Rainbow Man/John 3:16* [1997] at school? I made some short pieces, but Riggs was dying at that time and the program was kind of falling apart, and there really just wasn't any support to do a longer work. So I graduated, and I figured I'd have

to get a job, so I moved to L.A. and got this job working for Fox Television on this news magazine show. My job was to find footage of people. It was a really dumb job and I needed something to keep me busy. I had read something about the Rainbow Man in a paper and really got curious. It really got under my skin, so I just decided to try to find shots of the Rainbow Man, because I could call up Major League Baseball to get stuff for stories, like they were doing a profile on Barry Bonds. I would just slip in, "Hey, could I also have the 1977 World Series?" I started to acquire all this footage of the Rainbow Man, and at first it was just kind of a funny, goof, lark type of thing, but then after a while it started to become more serious. I was totally perplexed because my parents were kind of superliberals, and so they didn't have a TV when I was growing up.

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Interview excerpted from Mike Plante, "Sam Green: The Line Between Fiction and Nonfiction Is Blurrier Than Most People Think," *Cinemad* (June 2004). Used with permission.

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Sam Green, stills from *lot 63, grave c*, 2006. Video and appropriated film, color and black-and-white, sound; 9 min., 47 sec.



I never watched TV, and I remember reading about the Rainbow Man when I was in L.A. and thinking to myself, "How do I know who this guy is? How has he penetrated into my consciousness? I never even watch TV." So that was one of the things that interested me, that he had been so incredibly successful, in a way.

At least according to your video, it's misguided, but it's an interesting goal. The cult of celebrity is interesting, and then when you mix in the religion, and a crazy upbringing, the rest of the story. He sort of struck me as like the ultra-American. He seemed to have all the qualities of an American, only in super-extreme forms, like no family, no direction, no other values except TV. TV was his total reference point. That's obviously not a good recipe for having a stable, positive, peaceful life.

Was he pretty cooperative since you were another piece of his celebrity? I wrote him a letter. He'd been in prison for a couple years and nobody had ever visited him. He'd never had a single visit. I went once without a camera and talked to him. He was crazy about the idea because at that point, and I think it's actually still true, he felt like the world was still just about to end, and so I was a way for him to get the word out. It was weird when I actually did go back and interview him; I did this long interview, and you know how when you do an interview you save the more sensitive questions for the end, and one of the questions I saved in case he'd get upset was, "Do you think that the media, myself included, exploited you?" He had been really tense throughout the whole interview and it was the only time that he smiled. He actually smiled and chuckled. He said, "Actually, I'm the one that's exploiting you. Who else is getting interviewed in this prison today?" And it sort of knocked me back for a minute. You know, that's the way

he thinks of it. He feels like he's using the press, although I would disagree with that.

He's still in prison? Yeah, he's gonna be there forever. I showed it in Europe, and the first question was always, "How is this guy in prison for life?" To them, it makes absolutely no sense.

It's because we're scared of the mentally ill. Yeah, or just somehow this crazy guy is stuck in the noncrazy part of the criminal justice system, which is itself crazy.

Is he actually in a prison or is it a mental health institution? He's in Vacaville [at the California State Medical Corrections Facility], which is like a prison, but it's prison for... not people who are certifiably crazy, but I think they pump them full of drugs and stuff like that. It's a medical prison.

When did you find out about the incident in your video *Pie Fight '69* [2000]? It was probably like '98 or something. The year after *Rainbow Man*, I started working on *The Weather Underground* [2002], and I was at the Bettman Archives in New York, which is this great photo archive that has since been bought by Bill Gates and is not accessible anymore. I was going through folders of photos, and one of the photos was this really funny one of a woman in a tutu throwing a pie, and it said, "San Francisco Film Festival, Opening Night, 1969." And it didn't say anything more than that, and I was completely intrigued. So when I got back, I got a couple of articles and read about what happened... the ringleader was Peter Adair, who was a huge hero of mine.

The first real film that had moved me had been... this is a little bit of a digression. I'd had a job in college showing movies in class-



rooms, and this was back in the days when you would bring a 16mm film into the class, set up the projector, and show it. Most of the movies sucked. I showed *Inside the Human Brain*, an educational film, in psychology classes like four hundred times, and these were all old educational movies, but once I went to a comparative religion class and showed this movie, *Holy Ghost People* [1967]. It's Peter Adair's first movie, and it's a documentary he made when he was actually still a college student at Antioch College. It's about this church in West Virginia, Appalachia, in the late sixties, where they handle snakes. Like that's part of their ecstatic approach to religion where they handle snakes and speak in tongues. They handle rattlesnakes. It's fucking amazing. This is a verité documentary in black and white. Unbelievable. After I saw it in class, my jaw dropped and I took it back to the office, and just projected it on the wall and watched it again. I was amazed. I'd never seen a movie that moved me like that, so Peter Adair was always a big hero of mine. When I got these articles about the pie fight incident and read that Peter Adair had been the ringleader, I was really intrigued, and also the articles had mentioned that the radicals had filmed this event with cameras and they wanted to make a film about it. I just started to ask around to find out about what happened to this film, and nobody really knew. So it became this big mystery, and then I talked to Bill Daniel, you know, like the Zelig of the underground film world. He said, "Oh yeah, I found that film once in the free box at Film Arts Foundation." You know, in the lobby there's this box where you can put things if you just want to give them away. I was amazed. I said, "Well, what did you do with it?" And he said, "I gave it back to Peter Adair," who was real sick with AIDS and had subsequently died. So I asked around, I went to Peter Adair's family, his business partner, and his old boyfriend, because now I knew that the film existed, but it had sort of disappeared again. Nobody had it and I went through all of his stuff and I couldn't find it. This went on for a couple years, so I sort of figured it was lost. Then one day, late at night, I got a call from Bill Daniel, saying, "Sam, you won't believe this. I was in the basement of ATA (Artists Television Access) going through some unmarked boxes and I found that film again." The odds of that, that's almost divine, there's no other way of explaining it. So I rushed over to look at it and it was amazing footage, it was beautiful. At that point, I was really inspired to make that little movie.

What drew you to *The Weather Underground*? I had always known about the group and I loved the story. With *The Rainbow Man/John 3:16*, I really loved that story. It resonated with me emotionally and it felt to me like it was a story that was almost a parable. This is what I liked about it. It was a really fascinating story, but it evoked ideas and themes, and kind of said something in a very indirect way. It was kind of dramatic and sexy and interesting, but there was also a lot of substance at the heart of it.

And at that point, was it sort of a forgotten thing? I think it's more than that. It was always weird to me that when you work on a documentary, you have eight billion conversations with people about what you're working on. Anybody over forty that I talked to about it, said, "Oh, wow, the Weather Underground," and 99.9 percent of people under forty I mentioned it to would just have this blank look. They'd never heard of the group. I think, in a way, it doesn't fit into the sort of clean cartoon version of the sixties in history at this point. You know, the idea that everybody was a hippie, and they all went to Woodstock and protested the war, and then the war stopped and everybody got into disco and got jobs. I don't think it's a conspiracy to suppress a story like this so much as it's hard to write about it. You have to write about it in a sophisticated way to fit it into those narratives.



Were the people in the Weather Underground pretty much on board? Oh, no. They all initially said it was a horrible idea. None of them wanted it to happen at first. "Why bring this up?" It took a long time to get the people who had been in the group comfortable with us to the point where they would actually participate in the project.

How did you even find them? Some of them are kind of public, but most of the others, it became pretty clear early on that there were going to be good ways and bad ways to find them. Once I just got somebody's number off the Internet and I called her up. I said, "Hi, I'm doing a documentary on the Weather Underground. Can I talk to you?" There was this long pause and she said, "I don't know how you got my number, but never call me again," and hung up. I just realized then that that's not a good way to do that. We would talk to people and sort of develop a relationship with them, and then ask them to help us get in touch with other people. You know, one person could call another and say, "These guys are doing some research and they're okay, they just want to talk to you in a very off the record way." Almost anybody will have coffee with you just to see who you are, and after awhile we were able to impress upon people that we were serious and it wasn't Fox News, it was an independent film.

How did you go about deciding what was important and what had to be included, and how do you figure out what order all those things are? That was really hard. With documentary, you're always kind of subtly rearranging chronological events. The line between fiction and nonfiction is blurrier than most people think. I'm not making stuff up, but just sort of adjusting sometimes. With *The Weather Underground*, there were all these people who had (a) been in the group, and you had to have your shit straight for them, and (b) all the people who had lived through that time and had strong feelings about the group, either pro or con. I felt a huge responsibility to know what I was talking about and to get it right. The editing took a long, long time just to make the film communicate the story in a clear way, and also to include enough context where it made sense, and make sure that important things were in there, and on top of that to make it work as a narrative. Those are sometimes things that conflict. With a documentary, you

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Sam Green, still from *The Rainbow Man/John 3:16*, 1997. Single-channel video, color, sound; 40 min., 30 sec.

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Members of the Weathermen, a group of extreme-leftist radicals, march in Chicago during the Days of Rage, October 1969. Black-and-white photograph. Photo by David Fenton.

show people a rough cut of the film and you do that over and over again. The most helpful person was Caveh Zahedi. He was amazing, because I didn't know anything about dramatic film. He said real early on that you've got to make this work like a feature film. You sort of have to take that structure and use it, and I've got nothing against that. If those kinds of things work, I'm all for it. It's a real formula and I didn't adopt it a hundred percent, but the ideas behind it are really sound.

Was there anything that you thought would work and you ended up taking it out? I went through all sorts of crazy ideas. I had this great footage that I loved and this whole section I put together. I was trying to develop this sort of subtheme for the movie about the consolidation of the media and sort of explain why nobody under forty has ever heard of the Weather Underground. I was in the middle of editing and I read 1984, which I'd read in high school and thought was cool, but I read it again and I was flabbergasted by how good and how sophisticated it was. There was this quote in there, and I'm paraphrasing here, "Whoever controls the present controls the past, and whoever controls the past controls the future," and there's a lot to that. The idea that whoever is in power now controls what we know of history or how we think about history, and people's notions of the past inform what they're going to do in the future. I tried for a long time to work in this more experimental thread through the documentary that evoked these ideas in a very nondidactic way, and it never worked. Eventually I had to cut it out. That kind of broke my heart, because one of the videos that I loved and that was kind of an inspiration for me in making *The Weather Underground* was Johan Grimonprez's *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* [1997]. It's amazing. It's a really smart video about lots of big ideas, but never explicitly so. It's very experimental in that it's just this weird history of the hijacking phenomenon without anything else that's explicitly articulated, and it's just a compilation of great footage. I was aiming to do something that was in that direction, in terms of being experimental, but I kept getting pushed in a more straight direction just by the nature of the story and the kind of responsibility that I felt to make it clear.

Is there still no way for somebody who wants to make documentaries to kind of navigate making a living? I'm convinced that the only way to do it is to make films really fast, and make 'em for TV, and get paid while you make 'em. Anybody I know who's done that has started to make shitty films. I'm just going to keep doing it as long as I can. I do a few college screenings and make a little money off that, but I teach and that's how I make money, and I also live in a pretty low-budget way.

I think it's age fifty where people just kind of— Fall off. "It's a young person's game."

Or then it's the wine commercials, the comedy with Robin Williams. The bad corporate videos.

Yeah, I mean, you gotta plan your eventual sellout. The problem is at that point, it's going to be for such little bucks, an exercise in humiliation. At that point, I'm going to go to law school. In California, you don't actually have to go to law school, you can just take the bar exam. Very few people do it, but I'm just gonna study hard for a year.

Do you have another film lined up? I'm doing something, it's a real messy idea at this point, but I want to do something that's more experimental, a documentary that weaves together unrelated stories to kind of make a meta-narrative, in a way, that would be about idealism and utopia, the idea of utopia, and the limitations of human nature. I'm approaching things differently than I have in the past where I've always had a story that evokes ideas, and here I'm sort of starting with the ideas and putting together a few stories. I don't know, it's still real unformed at this point. I gotta figure out a way to work in a celebrity, though. I'm trying to see how this idea can incorporate the rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard. If I could get ODB in this, I'd be really happy.

