Chapter 18

"A BASTARD UNION OF SEVERAL FORMS"

Style and Narrative in *An American Family*

Jeffrey K. Ruoff

Our story begins in the Loud home at 35 Wooddale Lane. . . .

Craig Gilbert, *An American Family*

*An American Family* (1973) bridges the stylistic conventions of independent documentary film and broadcast television, marrying the innovations of American cinema verité to the narrative traditions of TV. The twelve-episode series chronicles seven months in the lives of the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, including the divorce proceedings of the parents. Producer Craig Gilbert deliberately chose an upper-middle-class family whose lifestyle approximated that of families seen on situation comedies such as *Make Room for Daddy* (1953–65). Under his supervision, Susan and Alan Raymond filmed the everyday lives of Pat and William Loud and their children, Lance, Kevin, Grant, Delilah, and Michele. The completed documentary captured the imagination of the American public when it was first aired by the Public Broadcasting Service in the winter of 1973. Ten million viewers followed the Louds’ unfolding marital problems in a controversial weekly show that some critics called a real-life soap opera.

Like all cultural artifacts, films and television programs cannot be fully understood outside their historical contexts of production and reception. *An American Family* would never have been made by the commercial networks
(ABC, NBC, or CBS), which, by the early 1970s, had scaled back documentary productions in the race for audience ratings (Brown 198). Even for educational and public TV, the form and content of the series were radical innovations, for Gilbert’s use of dramatic storytelling techniques in a nonfictional account of family life blurred conventions of different media forms.

As Robert Allen notes, fictional television programs usually employ a “narrative mode” of viewer address, adopted from classical Hollywood cinema, while nonfiction shows generally rely upon a “rhetorical mode” of viewer address adapted from radio (“Criticism” 90–91). A distinctly hybrid work, An American Family confounds this typology: it represents, in the words of Yale drama professor Richard Gilman, a “bastard union of several forms” (quoted in Carlin 25). Though widely known as an example of observational cinema, the series mixes the narrative traditions of the film and television industries. Furthermore, it struggles against its own interpretive tendencies, striving to show “life as it is” while simultaneously criticizing American society in the early 1970s. As such, like the Loud family it depicts, An American Family is a text at war with itself.

The documentary consists of twelve hour-long episodes. The first show introduces the family members and the central story line, while the next eleven programs follow their activities in the summer and fall of 1971. Individual shows emphasize certain events and characters over others as, for example, hour seven explores Grant’s attitude toward his summer job. With one crucial exception, the series proceeds in a loose chronological order. Though it often falls short, An American Family, like many works of observational cinema, strives for the clarity and comprehensibility of Hollywood cinema and American commercial television. Observational documentaries typically depict actual events in dramatic form, using continuity techniques conventionally associated with mainstream fiction film. Whereas most nonfiction programming, particularly TV news, speaks directly to the audience, Gilbert’s series addresses the viewer only indirectly through the telling of a story.

As a style, observational cinema tends more toward the “open” textual pole of Jean-Luc Godard and Roberto Rossellini than the “closed” pole of Alfred Hitchcock and Alain Resnais (Allen, Soap Operas 81–84). Vis-à-vis traditional documentaries, observational films are polysemic because they lack the devices of voice-over, interviews, and nondiegetic music through which point of view may be unequivocally expressed. A comparatively open text, An American Family ends on a decisively ambiguous note, discussing her anticipated alimony arrangement. Pat Loud mentions that she may never marry again. As she concludes that “these things happen,” the final episode freezes on her smiling face in medium close-up. Thus, in an

ending reminiscent of Franco Rossellini’s 1959), producer Gilbert

Throughout the series, narrated by David Frost, the Louds’American Family’ presents a selective, critical, and sympathetic view of the family, their lives, and their problems. The pronounced story line, the strong continuity of classic television, and the strong narrative momentum keep the viewer engaged from episode to episode.

An American Family, then, program violates viewer expectations. Normally genres of fiction, the innovative style of An American Family clearly articulated standards of representation. A roundtable discussion held at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1973, in the same week that Margaret Mead and five experts in anthropology on the series. The panel demonstrates the difficulty of establishing an audience for a documentary series to establish national recognition. Gilmore’s hybridistic modes of narration, Fictional cinema, and nonfiction television were not yet fully understood.
An American Family

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Throughout the series, narrative omniscience remains the order of the day. In episode three, the coverage of the annual recital of the Rudenko School of Dance presents sequential and simultaneous actions occurring backstage, onstage, and in the audience, shown from a panoply of different angles. Numerous performances by Delilah and Michele Loud are featured. Music bridges the movement from the stage to the dressing room, maintaining continuous spatial and temporal relations. This sequence, and the episode with it, ends with a freeze frame on Bill and Pat Loud applauding from their seats in the Lobero Theater.

The pronounced story emphasis of the actuality material calls to mind the strong continuity of classical Hollywood narration. For example, a tarot card reader in episode two accurately hints at Pat Loud's coming separation from her husband. The scene forecasts later plot developments, as the card reader suggests to Pat that "This year is a year of changes. You'll have a choice to make which you are building up to. Something is ending now."

For some critics, use of such continuity editing techniques, suspense, and foreshadowing partially undermines the reality effect of the series (Gaines 48). In other words, the narrative drive of *An American Family* grate against the realism of the handheld camera and direct sound. In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, David Bordwell suggests that "the strongest illusion of reality comes from tight causal motivation" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 19). Just the opposite appears to be the case with nonfiction: if things fit together too neatly, viewers distrust the narration and question the realism.

*An American Family*, then, blurs generic categories. The twelve-part program violates viewer expectations about what documentaries are supposed to do. Normally genres restrain the range of possible interpretations. The innovative style of *An American Family*, coupled with the absence of clearly articulated standards for nonfiction, challenges conventional forms of representation. A roundtable discussion broadcast by WNET on April 5, 1973, in the same weekly time slot as the series, aired the opinions of Margaret Mead and five experts in literature, drama, history, psychiatry, and anthropology on the series. The sheer variety of disciplines represented on the panel demonstrates the difficulty contemporary critics had fitting this documentary series to established genres and forms.

Its "neither fish nor fowl" generic instability remains one of its most defining features. Though shot on film, in a style associated with observational cinema, Gilbert's hybrid show adopts some of television's characteristic modes of narration. Five years before *Dallas* (1978–91), *An American
Family blurred the distinctions between daytime serials and prime-time programs. To paraphrase Robert C. Allen's description of the codes of soap opera, Gilbert's work, to a greater extent than any other documentary, walks the line between a program that "spills over into the experiential world of the viewer" and a program that may be "read as fiction" (Soap Operas 92). As such, An American Family announces the breakdown of fixed distinctions between reality and spectacle, public and private, serial narrative and nonfiction, film and television.

**Multiple-Focus Narrative**

An American Family capitalizes on one of the historically dominant characteristics of American television—namely, serial narrative. Scene changes in the twelve-part program are facilitated by the large cast of principal characters and the ability to shift focus from one family member to another. Story lines are temporarily abandoned only to be picked up later in the documentary. This multiple-focus narrative results in several ongoing plots. For example, Grant and Kevin's band practices in the garage in episode one, discusses recording contracts in episode three, performs at a high school pep rally in episode ten, and auditions for a club gig in episode twelve. An American Family presents not the strict linear causal chain of classical Hollywood cinema, with its goal-oriented protagonists and question-and-answer story structure, but rather the slow pace of serial narrative, confirming John Ellis's intuition that, on television, "The normal movement between segments is one of vague simultaneity (meanwhile...meanwhile...a bit later...)

While there are multiple stories in An American Family, the dominant plot line involves the marital problems of Mr. and Mrs. Loud, which culminate in their separation and preparation for divorce. Other developments explored include the affairs of Bill's business, the relations between the Louds and their children, Lance's activities in New York City and his travels in Europe, Dillah's dance performance and her budding relationship with boyfriend Brad (one of the underdeveloped plot lines), Pat's visit to her mother in Eugene and her vacation in Taos, Kevin's business trip to Southeast Asia (another story more absent than present). Grant's summer job as a construction worker, and the evolution of the garage band. The documentary rarely veers from the characters' immediate concerns with interpersonal relationships. Of a filmed discussion about the Vietnam War between Bill Loud and striking longshoremen in San Francisco, coordinating producer Jacqueline Donnet said, "You could have made an hour show on that discussion alone. But there was just no way to fit it in. It didn't move forward the story line" (85). As a result, stories focus on the personal.

In Speaking of Soap Operas that distinguish daytime format from serials, characters and multiple daily lives of the character, involvement over weeks, encourages viewers to think about neighbors. The open-ended similarities with every day Louds, powerfully commonalities conventions of the family members and Pat's visit to her mother in Eugene, on any future event. In fact, trip to Eugene delays the visit with her husband.

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Like soap operas, An American Family
spectators through multi
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move forward the story of the family” (quoted in Ruoff, “Family Programming” 85). As a result, the so-called great events of contemporary history are wholly absent from *An American Family*. As in daytime TV serials, the stories focus on the personal problems of the characters.

In *Speaking of Soap Operas*, Robert C. Allen describes the characteristics that distinguish daytime serials from other narrative forms: a continuous format that indefinitely postpones closure in favor of process; multiple characters and multiple narrative plot lines; and a focus on the intimate daily lives of the characters. As such, soaps rely on consistent viewer involvement over weeks, months, and years. Similarly, *An American Family* encourages viewers to think about the Louds as if they were their next-door neighbors. The open-ended episodic structure of the program accentuates similarities with everyday life and promotes strong identification with the Louds, powerfully combining the reality effect of soap operas with documentary conventions of authenticity. Many scenes simply give insight into the family members and their relationships without creating any suspense. Pat’s visit to her mother in episode four focuses on their shared history, not on any future event. In fact, in terms of narrative development, Mrs. Loud’s trip to Eugene delays the main plot line of her deteriorating relationship with her husband.

The episodic story structure employs greater redundancy than classical Hollywood narrative. Soaps reiterate plot developments extensively to keep irregular viewers up-to-date (Allen, *Soap Operas* 70). In *An American Family*, although most scenes occur only once, there are interesting exceptions. At the end of episode eight, having returned from his cross-country trip, Bill asks Grant, “How’s everything on the home front?” After a brief, but revealing, conversation, a freeze frame sets father and son off against the darkness of the Santa Barbara airport parking lot. Hour nine begins by repeating the airport exchange between Bill and Grant in its entirety, including Mr. Loud’s uncanny concluding remark, “Walk right into the lion’s den, huh?” While offering background information, the repetition also signals the scene’s importance, further building suspense for Bill’s return to Wooddale Lane for the pivotal exchange in which his wife asks him to move out of the house.

**Multiple Characters**

Like soap operas, *An American Family* leaves room for active involvement of spectators through multiple stories drawn out through multiple episodes. In between shows, viewers have time to speculate with friends about future character developments. For many, the interest of *An American Family*
comes from watching the intimate life of an actual family in serial form: "You find yourself sticking with the Louds with the same compulsion that draws you back day after day to your favorite soap opera. The tension is heightened by the realization that you are identifying, not with a fictitious character, but with a flesh and blood person who is responding to personal problems of the kind you yourself might face" (Harrington 5).

Like most multiple-focus narrative television shows, An American Family offers viewers choices for sympathetic identification among different characters, their values, and behaviors (Allen, Soap Operas 170). Most consistently, the series contrasts Mr. and Mrs. Loud's conflicting attitudes toward marriage and parenting, implicitly suggesting a "battle of the sexes" drama typical of situation comedies. For example, the twelve-hour documentary ends with a scene of Bill at lunch with a friend talking about marriage and its discontents followed by a similar scene of Pat at dinner with friends discussing her likely divorce settlement.

Nevertheless, on the basis of time devoted to her, Pat Loud emerges as the lead character in the series. At the beginning of episode three, after she inspects a shipment of materials in Baltimore for her husband's business, the company representative gives her the backhanded compliment, "Well, I think that you did a very good job for a housewife." Over the course of the twelve shows, Pat gradually changes from a married homemaker to a single mother looking for work. Episode four focuses almost exclusively on Mrs. Loud, detailing her memories through such exceptional techniques as first-person voice-over narration, home movies, and snapshots. Five subjective flashbacks introduce incidents from her childhood and young adult years. Even so, the narration never restricts itself to her point of view, combining omniscient and subjective perspectives for this nostalgic journey home.

In addition to the "battle of the sexes" dynamic, the family members represent different normative systems: Bill's work ethic and, to a lesser extent, Pat's; the children's pleasure principle (especially Grant's); and Lance's avant-garde, épater le bourgeois attitude. Though occasionally bluntly articulated, these contrasts often remain implicit within the documentary. Having seen Vain Victory, the drag queen parody of the American musical at La Mama Theater in Greenwich Village, in hour two, audience members cannot avoid making comparisons with Delilah and Michele Loud's amateur dance performances in the following episode. While the sequencing favors the transvestite variety review, either can appear ridiculous. Sitting at Rainer's Deli afterward in episode two, Pat Loud expresses her view that Vain Victory was "pretty gross."

Hour five explores the main characters' attitudes toward work. An independent businessman, Bill Loud embodies a conservative entrepreneurial mentality that his children, and his business trip to Southeast Asia for a son still living at home. Unaware of the music business, he is shocked by the news that his son has made a fortune with a recording of a folk song. Meanwhile, Mr. Loud, a successful Southern California lawyer, finds himself in a moral dilemma when he discovers that his teenage son is engaged in drug dealing. The episode ends with the son's arrival at the Loud's house, where he is welcomed by his parents, who are visibly relieved to have their son back home again, despite the debt he has accumulated.

Hour seven picks up this action, as Grant complains to his fiancée about his musical interests: "I'm not even interested in music," he exclaims, "I'm just interested in being a banker." "I laugh," Bill replies, "That's the way you think, you wouldn't be?" In episode ten, workers that his teenage son is the only family member in the show. Purchasing a ticket to the West Coast in episode eleven, La Santa Barbara is "more than immaterial, however, does not limit the story's focus on the family's life and relationships, which remain the central focus of the series. As the season progresses, the characters confront various challenges, both personal and professional, that test their abilities to maintain their relationships and achieve their goals.
mentality that his children, and the series itself, ridicule. After arranging a business trip to Southeast Asia for Kevin, he tries to find work for his other son still living at home. Unaware of his father’s plans, Grant listens to The Who sing “We Don’t Get Fooled Again.” Suggesting utopian desires unfulfilled, Roger Daltry exhorts his young admirer to “take a bow for the new revolution.” Meanwhile Mr. Loud secures a job for Grant with the “curb king of southern California.” Offered work pouring cement, the seventeen-year-old refers to his father’s machinations as “the concrete caper.” Subsequently, at the airport with Kevin, Bill describes the beauty of strip-mining: “When that great big Marion 5600 shovel throws that bucket out there and sucks that dirt back up there, and it’s cold, you know, and you see more metal roll off that thing, I mean, you’re on Broadway, you know. You’re really at the top of the heap.” The program then juxtaposes Bill’s euphoric remarks with a scene of Grant at work under the searing Santa Barbara sun—he’s definitely not on Broadway. Although the sun sets during their ride to the airport, the episode cuts to a daytime sequence of Grant and then back to Kevin again at the departure gate, a subtle manipulation of story order for contrast.

Hour seven picks up this ideological argument between the generations, as Grant complains to his father about a lack of support for his career interests in music: “I’m not even going to go into it with you, because you’ll just give me all this jazz about, well, ‘You gotta go to college and take some economics, and a banking course, and you’ll be set for the rest of your life.’” Laughing, Bill remains true to form in his response: “Well, don’t you think you would be?” In episode eight, Mr. Loud jokingly tells some mine workers that his teenage son is “the forerunner of the three-day week.” Meanwhile, Lance, traveling abroad in hour six, invents a story about having his money stolen so that his parents will send more. In the final show, Bill refers to his eldest son as the “greatest con artist you ever saw.” The use of overlapping stories and numerous characters offers a more supple range of viewing positions than is usually seen in classical Hollywood films. The multiple-focus narrative style leaves room for audiences, as one reviewer noted, “to root for” their favorite Loud (Rosenblatt 21).

Nevertheless, the documentary itself often favors Lance’s perspective for the critique he extends of his family and life in Southern California. Lance is the only family member other than Pat to be the focus of an individual show. Purchasing a ticket at Kennedy Airport for his return to the West Coast in episode eleven, Lance dryly tells the reservations clerk that Santa Barbara is “more than just a home, it’s a way of life.” The documentary, however, does not limit itself to his point of view: editorial perspective circulates freely among the different characters. In the final hour,
Mr. Loud’s friend Robert sums up the pessimistic point of view of An American Family during a lunch date with Bill: “The family as we knew it in our youth is a thing of the past and you see all the signs of it coming to an end.”

The Structure of Episode One

At the outset of An American Family, producer Craig Gilbert provides an on-camera introduction that recalls the standard direct address of nonfictional TV (Ruoff, “Conventions” 229–31). After this prologue, and at the beginning of each subsequent episode, a split-screen montage sequence and musical theme song introduce the family members one by one. Nothing in Gilbert’s series smacks of television situation comedies such as The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (1952–66) so much as this title sequence. Even more than the episodic structure, the suburban setting, and the family focus, the series title sequence sets up television representations of family life as the primary intertext. For this reason, Gilbert’s series functions at least as much as a critique of the representation of family life on fictional TV programs as a statement about contemporary society.

The first twelve scenes feature New Year’s Eve preparations and celebrations on December 31, 1971. As Pat arranges flowers in a vase at home, Gilbert announces in voice-over, “Pat Loud and her husband, Bill, separated four months ago after twenty years of marriage.” Introduced alone in his apartment, Mr. Loud mechanically sifts through a large pile of commercial Christmas cards, chuckling laconically in response to one of them. The parallel editing structure implies simultaneity of time, and indeed, later, the program includes a terse phone conversation between Bill and Pat. Another phone call, between the Lounds’ fifteen-year-old daughter and her boyfriend, immediately follows this exchange. Delilah and Brad’s awkward tenderness toward each other contrasts vividly with the tired cynicism of her parents’ discussion.

Pat Loud is the only adult present at the New Year’s festivities at 35 Wooddale Lane. The camera lingers on her isolation as she reads, pets the dog, and watches her children dance to the Andrews Sisters’ “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.” Continuing the earlier crosscutting paradigm, strictly parallel scenes compare her evening with her husband’s. A close-up on Pat’s face slowly dissolves to a similar shot of Bill dancing with another woman, suggesting the source of Pat’s discontent. The strains of Carole King’s “You’ve Got a Friend,” sung by a piano man in the back of the restaurant, fill in the details. The poignant symbolism of the new year, with its retrospective glance toward the past and resolutions for the future, underlines this segment.

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When the story of the Louds then jumps back to the spring of 1971, viewers scan for the signs of the future in the status quo. Having shown the effects—the Louds’ separation—the documentary returns to explore the causes. The flashback structure strongly enforces a cause-and-effect chain of narrative associations. Pat’s irritation as she prepares breakfast reads as her dissatisfaction with her husband. Bill appears and asks if she has seen his keys. “No, sir,” she replies curtly, “I’ll look for them.”

Producer Gilbert uses this flashback structure to rein in the inherent polysemic quality, the openness, of the observational footage. Thanks to this teleological structure, audience members know the trajectory and outcome of An American Family from the opening episode. The flashback puts viewers in a position of superiority in relation to the characters. This hierarchy of knowledge, and the omniscient narration, may have contributed to the tone of moral superiority TV critics exhibited toward the family in 1973 (Ruff, “Real Life”).

Despite the emphasis placed on the Louds’ separation in hour one, their marriage only indirectly surfaces as an issue in the next five hours of An American Family. Bill does not appear at all during episode two; in hour four, he figures in only one scene, a telephone conversation with Lance. Indirect references to marital problems in the early shows become comprehensible only in light of Gilbert’s announcement that the Louds have separated. The state of their relationship must be inferred by its relative absence in the narrative. For example, Pat and Bill take separate vacations in programs four and five. In this way, the central dilemma of the documentary remains tantalizingly offscreen, indefinitely postponed through story techniques that delay the split until episode nine.

Having effectively raised the marital question during the “late spring morning,” the first episode cuts thirty-five hundred miles to New York City to introduce the one family member not present at the breakfast meal. Lance delivers a long tirade about his family, entirely in voice-over, as he sorts his clothes alone in a room at the Chelsea Hotel. Through this veiled interview technique, An American Family implicitly endorses Lance’s outsider point of view.

Although the multiple-focus narrative allows for abrupt shifts from story line to story line, or character to character, a degree of continuity carries one sequence into another. For example, Lance’s concluding comment about his younger brother—“I think that all of us Grant will probably succeed most”—sets up the next scene. In a social studies class at Santa Barbara High School, Grant gives a report on the Reconstruction period in American history. The teacher tries to get him to elaborate on
his description of it as a "tragic era." Grant's lackluster performance in class amusingly contradicts Lance's prediction. After much clowning, he remarks that Reconstruction was an attempt to give blacks "equal social status with the whites," so that they, too, could achieve "the American dream."

The following shot shows Mrs. Loud pushing an overflowing cart at a supermarket; she can barely put in another bottle of salad dressing. Buying goods for six people, Pat clearly has no time or interest in comparison shopping. Grant's reference to the "American dream" carries over explicitly as a commentary on the family's upper-middle-class way of life, consisting primarily of taken-for-granted material abundance. The reference to "the American dream," a crucial one for the program, stands out thanks to the juxtaposition of otherwise unrelated scenes. Like other social critics of the period, Craig Gilbert wanted to say that the American dream had become, in Charles Reich's words, "a rags-to-riches type of narrow materialism" (22). In the next sequence, viewers learn where the money comes from that supports the family's comfortable lifestyle. Mr. Loud stands beneath an enormous forklift in a strip-mining field. As he discusses the sale of industrial tools with another man in a hard hat, they watch a hill in the distance explode. Having provided a glimpse of

An American Family: Kevin Loud joins in Bill at work, the episode cuts to De's routine to "In the Mood."

Delilah's segment segues into a party chatter, the sunshine, the liq T-shirts, and the suggestion of extra atmosphere of upper-middle-class (In episode five, Pat jokes with fri, state, "The theory is that all of Calif all going to drop into the sea—Go- ends dramatically on Pat's riposte to "Well, for the record, she's just pass"

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raucous rehearsal of "Jumping Jack in the living room, Pat, Bill, Delilah distance to Lance on the telephone. B ing performance of "Summertime out by Grant, introduce the theme.
Bill at work, the episode cuts to Delilah and her class rehearsing a dance routine to “In the Mood.”

Delilah’s segment segues into an afternoon cocktail party. The careless party chatter, the sunshine, the liquor, the leathered faces, the Hawaiian T-shirts, and the suggestion of extramarital affairs all combine to create an atmosphere of upper-middle-class suburban decadence, California-style. (In episode five, Pat jokes with friends in Taos about her adopted home state, “The theory is that all of California is like Sodom and Gomorrah; it’s all going to drop into the sea—God’s wrath and all.”) The cocktail party ends dramatically on Pat’s riposte to Bill’s question about another woman, “Well, for the record, she’s just passing through.”

In the next scene, Michele grooms her horse, a gentle moment rendered all the more tranquil by the preceding noisy party. The peacefulness of Michele’s ride through the Santa Barbara hills is interrupted by a cut to a raucous rehearsal of “Jumping Jack Flash” by the garage band. Meanwhile, in the living room, Pat, Bill, Delilah, and Michele take turns talking long-distance to Lance on the telephone. Back in the garage, the band gives a rousing performance of “Summertime Blues.” The lyrics, energetically belted out by Grant, introduce the themes of teenage alienation and economic
dependency that will be explored in detail in hours five and seven. Episode one ends with a freeze frame of the group over which the credits roll.

**Representative Scene Construction**

Thirty minutes into episode one, as the New Year's celebrations conclude, the voice-over states, "Our story begins seven months earlier at six-thirty on a late spring morning." This scene of the Lounds at breakfast fulfills the stated goals of observational cinema inasmuch as there are no interviews, nondiegetic music, or voice-over narration. Similarly, the family members never explicitly address the camera. The scene consists of thirty-four shots and lasts seven and a half minutes; the average shot runs approximately thirteen seconds. A different shot shows each family member's "entrance" to the dining room, allowing the viewer to identify each person clearly. In addition, whenever possible, characters exit the frame before the program cuts to another shot, smoothing the transitions. All the action takes place in the kitchen and the dining room. Although some of the images are taken from the same camera angle, the framing varies significantly to allow the scene to flow smoothly. The handheld camera remains steady throughout as it refocuses to follow the action. Sounds flow across image cuts to maintain continuous spatial and temporal relations.

The breakfast provides a host of information about the Lounds. Pat and her daughters are the only family members working in the kitchen, suggesting a traditional division of labor in the home. The tone of Mrs. Loud's voice suggests thinly repressed discontent. Over the course of the twelve episodes, her anger grows and bursts into view, culminating in her demands for a divorce. Mr. Loud, however, avoids direct conflict and chooses instead to joke with his kids about their neglect of the backyard. Bill's jocular attitude, even in the face of adversity, remains his most notable personality trait in the documentary. When Kevin asks for lunch money, Mr. Loud complains—as he does on several occasions—about his son's laziness.

When Bill addresses his youngest child, he looks screen right in the direction of the kitchen. In the following shot, Michele, in the kitchen, looks screen left, acknowledging his words. The sounds and images reinforce one another; after Bill and Pat refer to Michele's health, a shot shows their daughter gently touching her throat. The editing maintains continuity through eyeline matches, overlapping sound cuts, point-of-view shots, and cutting-on-action techniques all common to fiction film. There are some jump cuts, however, such as consecutive shots of Grant, and the transitions are not as smooth as those the production values, especially rather than conventional continuity techniques condense the ellipses. An event that lasts one and a half minutes of screen time takes place in one minute that becomes the sequel to the Chelsea Hotel in New York.

While *An American Family* observational cinema, it deviates for example, the use of both conventions (Ruoff, "Conventions": occasion stylistic detours, individual scenes by implication. The multiple-focus on many different characters spreads the action. A half-hour flashback—the it simultaneously foreshadows and sets expectations. A more unrelated scenes remain of view. Although the observer as it occurs, the documentary sophistication.

**Reflexivity**

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In episode four, for exam-
are not as smooth as those of classical Hollywood movies. Furthermore, the production values, especially the lighting, remain those of verité documentary rather than conventional fiction with its polished look. The continuity techniques condense time and space without calling attention to the ellipses. An event that lasts up to an hour in real time takes only seven and a half minutes of screen time, yet nothing significant has been left out. The family sets the table, cooks breakfast, eats, cleans up, and leaves. As Pat casually glances out the kitchen window, a point-of-view shot from her perspective shows the children leaving for school. Their departure in a pickup truck ends the sequence; the episode cuts to an establishing shot of the Chelsea Hotel in New York, and a new scene begins.

While An American Family may be the most famous example of observational cinema, it deviates from the prescriptive rules of that style in, for example, the use of both first-person and third-person voice-over narration (Rouff, “Conventions” 229–34). Nevertheless, with the exception of occasional stylistic detours, Gilbert’s series constructs stories, episodes, and individual scenes by employing techniques from fictional film and television. The multiple-focus narrative intersperses story developments among many different characters. The teleological structure sets up an eleven-and-a-half-hour flashback—the longest in the history of moving images—while it simultaneously forges a stronger narrative chain of causes and effects than simple chronology. Within this structure, transitions between otherwise unrelated scenes remain key moments for expressing editorial point of view. Although the observational sequences seemingly represent life as it occurs, the documentary exhibits a fascinating and subtle narrative sophistication.

**Reflexivity and Observational Cinema**

Like fiction films, observational documentaries generally employ an impersonal narration that does not explicitly address the viewer. Nevertheless, anyone who actually watches An American Family, even just a single episode, witnesses numerous references to the audience. Although these may seem more incidental than deliberate, the narration does not systematically mask or disguise its tracks. Too many to catalogue, these are not the first elements viewers notice or the last. Thus Gilbert’s style falls in between the pronounced reflexivity of ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch and the mostly transparent approach of Frederick Wiseman.

In episode four, for example, an amusing discussion takes place about the proper way to display mayonnaise on the table at 35 Wooddale Lane.
Pat invokes standards proper for entertaining guests: "You're supposed to put it in a dish and not put the jar on the table." Her good-humored children refuse to participate in this charade and ignore her remonstrations, implicitly welcoming the filmmakers as members of the household. Alone in Bill's office in hour eleven, Lance finds a letter he wrote to his father and reads it aloud to the camera: "There are two things you can count on in life as the world turns. They are that at the end of the summer Lance always returns from an unsuccessful take-off on life's big runway, limping home on a path of wired money. And Ma and Pa Loud plummet head first from their Olympian heights of love and matrimony." Lance acknowledges the melodramatic associations of the documentary through his comparison of his family's experiences to the long-running soap opera As the World Turns (1956–2010). Only Bill's sudden return to his workplace interrupts this remarkable frame-breaking soliloquy.

In hour eight, Bill confesses his worries about Lance traveling in Europe to his colleagues in strip-mining, but his fears are dispelled by the fact that, as he remarks, "They have the camera crew with them over there, following them around." In episode ten, when Pat criticizes Grant's lack of interest in his classes, he turns to the camera to appeal to the audience for support, saying, "Nothing like a sympathetic mother!" Such ubiquitous references to the filmmaking process go beyond those of other observational works from the same period, pre-dating similar instances in, for example, Albert and David Maysles's Grey Gardens (1975). Critics who denounce observational documentaries as transparent forms that disguise the work of mediation, such as E. Ann Kaplan, would do well to look closely at An American Family (80).

The single most reflexive element of An American Family is Lance Loud, who relentlessly breaks the frame, acknowledging the presence of the camera throughout the twelve-hour series. Unlike the more naturalistic performances of his siblings and parents, Lance acts like a character from an Andy Warhol movie let loose in a film by Frederick Wiseman. A fan of Warhol's work, Lance gives one of the great camp performances in the history of the medium. Indeed, American television came out of the closet through An American Family. In Heavenly Bodies, Richard Dyer defines camp as a "characteristically gay way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalisation, and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable" (178). Shooting footage in super-8 on a Santa Barbara beach in episode twelve, Lance tells his cast of friends, "Realism is our aim for this film; it's going to be like a documentary," but his directions

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 vengeance on camp horror: “Okay, now a close-up of you looking like a hungry sex-devil.” Probably the first openly gay character ever seen on American TV, Lance consistently makes fun of the serious pretensions of the docu-
mentary, parodying the codes of observational cinema.

**Conclusion: The Children of An American Family**

While some may read Gilbert's program as the harbinger of the “society of the spectacle”—and it is a precursor of reality programming such as MTV’s *The Real World* (1992–present)—its greater merit lies in opening up the institution of the family, and issues of gender, sexuality, and interpersonal relations, to nonfiction film and video. Though experimental filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage had explored autobiographical themes in the previous decades, by the mid-1970s these topics were moving to the center of independent documentary through the efforts of such filmmakers as Joyce Chopra, Amalie Rothschild, and Ed Pincus. Pincus commenced work on his autobiographical epic *Diaries, 1971–76* (1981) at the same time that Gilbert proposed his nonfiction television series. Arguing that the personal is political, these filmmakers chose to make movies about themselves, their families, and their friends. *An American Family* accelerated and validated this tendency.

For the coming generation of documentary filmmakers, Gilbert's twelve-hour program was a revelation. Mark Rance—whose own works, including *Mom* (1978) and *Death and the Singing Telegram* (1981), are clearly influenced by *An American Family*—recalled watching the broadcast as a high school student, discovering in the process that “family life is the great subject of drama and the movies” (96). Other filmmakers—like Rance, students of Pincus and Richard Leacock at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1970s—continued to push nonfiction into increasingly private subject matter: Joel DeMott (*Demon Lover Diary*, 1979), Ann Schaeftel (*Breaking and Entering*, 1980), David Parry (*Premature*, 1981), Ross McElwee (*Backyard*, 1981; *Sherman's March*, 1985). Similarly, later first-person video diaries—such as those by Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman (*Silverlake Life: The View from Here*, 1992) and Marlon Riggs (*Tongues Untied*, 1989)—descend directly from the new terrain opened by Craig Gilbert's documentary in 1973. As more intimate life comes under the gaze of independent producers, the once scandalous revelations about the Lounds may pale by comparison. But as its influence implies, *An American Family* marks a new stage in the filming of the everyday lives of ordinary
individuals, a landmark in the history of nonfiction film. In its aftermath, the American documentary would never be the same.

Notes

For general comments on my work on An American Family, I am grateful to Lauren Rabinovitz. I would also like to thank Jeannette Sloniowski and Barry Keith Grant for their close readings of successive versions of this essay.


2. For a more extensive discussion of the narrative intelligibility of Hollywood cinema in comparison to observational cinema, see Ruoff, “Conventions,” 221–26.

Works Cited


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