From the Instructor

In WR 100: Documentary Film: History, Theory, and Form, we study a range of documentary films and the formal and ethical choices that shape them. Ethics are central to the documentary *Capturing the Friedmans* in a number of ways, from the lurid crimes allegedly committed by two members of the Friedman family to the potential exploitation of the film's subjects by the filmmaker, Andrew Jarecki. Ben Eisen's essay makes a genuine contribution to the scholarship on the film, arguing that the film's ethical lapses have some redeeming value for the Friedmans. This is the final paper that he wrote for my seminar, and the assignment was intentionally undefined to prepare students for the more open-ended assignments that they'll encounter in future classes. I asked students to generate a question about any of our films, and they had to draw on evidence from the film and any of our semester's many readings to answer it.

Two students and I critiqued an early version of this paper in a group conference. Each of us admired the general argument that Ben was pursuing, but we struggled to understand some sections. The reason, as one student so clearly put it, is that Ben's sentences were "pretty" but "easy to get lost in." The version that you see here is the fourth or fifth draft. With each revision, he tightened his language and, in the process, clarified his own thinking. In this way, this paper is a testament not just to Ben's creativity and discipline, but to the value of extensive feedback. Indeed, the excellent students in his WR 100 seminar helped to form and refine Ben's argument so that you would enjoy reading it as much as they did.

— Marisa Milanese

From the Writer

When selecting a documentary to write about for my final paper, the choice was easy. Capturing the Friedmans has Jews, molestation, and clowns—what could be more compelling? The documentary plays like a nonfictional revamp of Blue Velvet, exposing the seedy underbelly of a seemingly idyllic town and normal American family. Like David Lynch's classic, *Capturing the Friedmans* also proves depressing, disturbing, and surprisingly humane. But unlike Blue Velvet—in which the characters are fictional and thus saved from real public scrutiny—*Capturing the Friedmans* weighs its subjects under a harsh light that changes the public perception of the troubled titular family. After struggling with an essay topic, I chose to explore the question of who is ultimately responsible for the way the Friedmans are represented in the film. Since writing this essay, I've learned how to tighten my arguments (I apologize in advance for the wordiness and repetition) and make my writing a little more interesting to read. Fortunately, I've had the help of two great professors, Marisa Milanese and William Giraldi, who have reiterated the importance of being diplomatic and dynamic in writing, whether in discussing incorrigible Updikian protagonists or tempestuous birthday clowns.

— Benjamin Eisen

Benjamin Eisen

How Do I Look? Questioning the Control of Representation in *Capturing the Friedmans*

Over the years, documentary film has grown from its early authoritative voice-of-God style to more complex and propagandistic forms such as direct address. While modern documentaries still contain directorial bias, the use of new styles and technologies has distributed power among more participants within the film and complicated viewers' perceptions of the subjects. In the notable documentary *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), director Andrew Jarecki combines intimate home video, news footage, and various interviews to share the story of a family's dissolution during and after an investigation of the father and youngest son for child molestation. Although the Friedmans allowed Jarecki to publicize their story and use their home video, critic Kenneth Turan questioned, "Even if the Friedmans approved of their own exploitation, does that mean they were less taken advantage of?" In addition to challenging Jarecki's ethics, Turan indirectly questions who was responsible for the way the Friedmans are represented in the film. While not yet collaborative, the relationship between director and subject initially seems somewhat cooperative in *Capturing the Friedmans* due to its reliance on home video and interviews. However, while these documentary techniques offer the Friedmans limited power, the control is primarily illusory, and Jarecki assumes the majority of the responsibility for their representation. Despite the Friedmans' restricted control and Jarecki's ultimate manipulation of the family, the Friedmans still relay a more balanced, complex, and humanized view of themselves to the public through the home videos and interviews. Ultimately, though, the viewer is responsible for understanding the role the subjects play in their own

representation in order to recognize their humanity and to fairly interpret them.

In order to grasp the complexity of representation in *Capturing the Friedmans*, the viewer must understand the background of home video and appreciate the camera operator's influence on the video. Beginning in the 1980s, the emergence of new technologies and ever-increasing access to video cameras led to extensive documentation of the nuclear family. According to Marsha and Devin Orgeron, "The nuclear family's most important recreation was itself. Home movies conscripted 'togetherness,' family harmony, children, and travel into a performance of familialism" (49). Home videos promoted exhibitionism within families and complicated relationships by offering a "more critical way of capturing the family" (50). With a video camera, family members could corroborate their claims and opinions of other members with visual evidence. As people obsessively filmed daily life, they developed "a kind of neuroses" and looked to documentation for more than mere diversion. Susan Sontag contends more shrewdly that filming has become "a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power" (8). When people capture with a camera, they "take possession of space in which they are insecure" (9) and often "[encourage] whatever is going on to keep on happening" (12). In this light, home video does not offer an idyllic image of domesticity, but instead promotes the preferred visions of the camera operator, revealing some of his or her personality traits and biases.

Within *Capturing the Friedmans*, home video reflects how David Friedman subjectively represents his family and struggles to resolve his inner turmoil. Around the time of his father's and brother's arrest, David bought a video camera and began to document his family's disintegration in the wake of the accusations, recording uncomfortably intimate and confrontational scenes in the home. As Marsha and Devin Orgeron claim,

> David's video acts effectively disturb the various parts of the familial unit, factionalizing the group and, perhaps as a consequence, the audience as well . . . Aggressive, confrontational, and propagandistic at the microscopic level, David's videography teases out familial chaos in search of an affirmation of his own beliefs. (53)

In much of the home video, David portrays his mother as a disloyal traitor for not affirming her husband's innocence. In one notable scene, David sets up his camera from an over-the-shoulder angle and documents a family dinner in which David and Jesse argue with their mother, while their father sits passively and weakly attempts to calm his clan. Elaine is presented as an overdramatic martyr, crying, "Why don't you try once to be supportive of me?" The boys wryly try to explain themselves, but Elaine persistently interrupts. In another home video, David argues that the police erred in the situation with Jesse and Arnold and blames his mother, declaring, "She's brainwashing [Arnold] into thinking it's [his] fault and it's not [his] fault." Through the video camera, David blames others for the accusations and further idealizes his father. In addition, David detaches himself from the horrific situation by altering his role from son to director, allowing him to impose his own theories through visual proof. Simultaneously, though, David instigates and preserves the troublesome memories by recording them, illustrating his conflicted coping strategy in the midst of the scandal. On the way to his younger brother's court date, David asks from behind the camera, "You never touched a kid?" Jesse denies it, saying what David wants to hear. In response, David mutters satisfactorily, "Good," convincing himself of his brother's innocence through the camera.

Although David's dualistic role in the home video—acting as both subject and director—usually entails representing others, he becomes deeply vulnerable and undisguised in his bedroom video testimonials. Early in *Capturing the Friedmans*, David sets a video camera on top of his dresser and records himself. He waves to the camera as if greeting an audience, but claims that the footage is "private" and is between "me now and me of the future." David's expectation of an audience contradicts his declaration of privacy and makes his testimonial seem like direct address rather than self-address. Additionally, Jarecki needed David's consent to include this footage, further illustrating David's disingenuousness (Orgeron 52). Yet, in this light, his bedroom testimonials become a form of therapy for David, a way for him to divulge his anxieties to an unbiased listener. The camera provides him with the space for secure catharsis and seemingly empowers David by giving him complete control over his representation in these testimonials. Like much of his family, David is incredibly dramatic and cares about others' acceptance and understanding above all else, and

seems to know that he will be humanized to future viewers through these video diaries. David cries in front of the camera and describes being "so scared," inviting future viewers' sympathies, but also adds, "my mother could go to fucking hell." Thus, while not entirely sympathetic, David is humanized through his bedroom testimonials as a vulnerable victim of the scandal.

Further complicating the picture of the Friedmans is Jarecki's use of interviews, which have traditionally allowed subjects to feel some control over their representation. According to Bill Nichols, the string-of-interviews approach arose as "a strategic response to the recognition that neither can events speak for themselves nor can a single voice speak with ultimate authority." Unlike earlier forms of documentary, including voice-of-God propaganda and cinéma vérité, "[i]nterviews diffuse authority," in that they distribute power among various perspectives and let viewers come to their own conclusions of the ultimate truth (Pryluck 265). In addition, interviews give subjects the opportunity to speak about a past event, usually long after the event occurred. With this time, subjects can reflect on how they want to appear to audiences, a factor one must consider when weighing subjects' testimonials.

Unlike the home videos manipulated by David Friedman's biased agenda, interviews in *Capturing the Friedmans* offer a more balanced view of the subjects, as they are conducted over time, giving various historical perspectives of the events. While in home videos Elaine is depicted as an irritating self-victimizer, in interviews she comes across as a mother alienated by her male-dominated family merely attempting to find the truth behind the accusations. Though some viewers still perceive her as a nag in interviews and she remains a polarizing presence within the film, Elaine is at least humanized through interviews. Alex Gerbaz describes this process of humanization through interviews as a potential "ethical experience" (19) in which viewers come to "respect the conscious life of others" (26). Interviews force viewers to confront the humanity before them and call for an understanding of the subject's depth, if not empathy for the subject's experiences. As her sons blame her for not supporting their father, Elaine claims to understand their experience, explaining that her sons' "visions [of their father were] distorted" in this confusing situation and that she had experienced similar emotions as a child when her parents divorced.

Whereas Elaine appears magnanimous in her interviews, David further pushes his single-minded belief in his, pronouncing, "I never felt angry with my dad. My dad had nothing to do with this." Meanwhile, interviews allow Jesse to contest his lawyer's claim that Jesse admitted that his father molested him. To the Friedmans, interviews give them some control over how audiences see them, offering them a sense of justice, even if the viewers do not ultimately believe their version of the story. In this way, although interviews may inspire uncertainty, they allow subjects to demonstrate their humanity and depth to audiences.

Yet it was Jarecki who was ultimately in control of the subjects' representation, inspiring charges of "exploitation" like Turan's. To remedy ethical questions and ensure no manipulation occurs during a documentary's production, Calvin Pryluck asserts that the filmmaking should be "collaborative" between the filmmaker and subjects (26). *Capturing the Friedmans*, however, was not collaborative, since the Friedmans were not consulted during the editing process. Jarecki organized their story subjectively, even as many critics deemed the resulting film impartial. Interviews gave the Friedmans the opportunity to represent themselves in a positive light, but the complexity of the documentary as a whole, with its agenda-driven home video, television news footage, and interviews of outside perspectives limited their power in favor of an open-ended story (the tagline for the film—"Who do you believe?"—promoted this inconclusiveness). While the Friedmans felt they were collaborating on the film and as much as they appreciated sharing their individual perspectives, Jarecki ultimately assumed the majority of the responsibility for how the Friedmans were represented.

With this responsibility in Jarecki's hands, we must then question whether the Friedmans' consent was ethically granted, considering how unstable they were and how the documentary affected their lives. Prior to the making of *Capturing the Friedmans*, public perception of the family was tarnished by the media's initial portrayal of the scandal. Arnold and Jesse were pigeonholed as child molesters, while the rest of the family was forever associated with the scandal. Thus, when Jarecki demonstrated significant interest in telling the family's story, the Friedmans believed they had a chance to change the way the rest of the world looked at them. Their belief that they could control public perception must have been an

appealing reason to consent to participate. However, Pryluck argues that "consent is stacked in the filmmaker's favor", as the camera's presence is "subtly coercive" (22). These ideas of control and the camera's intimidation, coupled with the Friedmans' already performative roots (Arnold was a pianist, while David is a birthday clown) and familial self-obsession, made acquiring consent relatively easy. Once consent had been obtained, David Friedman recognized how the documentary could inevitably change his life when he said, "Just the intimation of something like that [being a part of a family accused of molestation] can ruin someone's career." Middle brother Seth probably recognized the film's potential effects, since he excused himself from being interviewed in the film at all. Despite David's awareness of how the film would affect his life, he still allowed Jarecki to publicize his family's story. In Kenneth Turan's eyes, Jarecki was unethical for exploiting such a dysfunctional family, even if they gave him consent. Therefore, the grounds on which Jarecki obtained consent are a bit morally questionable and seem to validate Turan's claim that the Friedmans were manipulated.

In spite of these ethical considerations, *Capturing the Friedmans* still offered the Friedmans an opportunity to represent themselves and humanized the family, even if public perception wasn't necessarily drastically changed. Despite their limited control in telling their story, the Friedmans still manage to express a more complex understanding of their ordeal and how it affected each family member. Turan was probably correct to claim the family was taken advantage of, but he failed to recognize how important it was for them to share their story and demonstrate their humanity to the general public. Subjects like the Friedmans deserve the audience's awareness of the complexity of representation in documentaries. Ultimately, only by recognizing the layers of representation in documentaries can audiences formulate a fair and complete understanding of the situation and people projected on the screen.

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