From the Instructor

Albert Tawil's essay on the documentary *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003) illustrates the value of asking just the right question. The film tells the story of Arnold and Jesse Friedman, who were accused of sexually molesting boys in the 1980s, and ends ambiguously, inviting viewers to ask if they were guilty or not guilty. Albert, however, pursues a more subtle and urgent question: Why did the Friedmans videotape themselves throughout their ordeal?

Drawing on Susan Sontag's seminal book *On Photography*, Albert explores the complex and ultimately unstable relationship among camera, subject, and memory. He works from different angles, analyzing the Friedmans' varying motivations rather than attempting to simplify their moral positions. Albert judiciously selects and interprets evidence from the film and, in a final act of intellectual balance, suggests that the Friedmans are no different from us: we are all chronic self-documenters, "creating a reality that otherwise would not have existed."

— Marisa Milanese

Albert Tawil

Clown By Day, Documentarian by Night

The documentary *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003) includes two types of footage: footage taken by the director, Andrew Jarecki, and footage taken by the Friedman family, two of whom were accused of child molestation in 1988. The father, Arnold, who once made a career performing in a band, ran popular computer and music classes in the basement of the family's Long Island home and was accused, along with his son and assistant, Jesse, of sexually abusing the students. Jarecki conducted dozens of interviews with the Friedmans' accusers, the law enforcement officials, and the Friedman family members themselves. Jarecki also includes clips of the Friedmans' home video, which documents things that most other families would not do, not to mention *film*. David, the oldest son, was the new owner of the camera and usually the one behind the lens; he lets us see almost everything that goes on behind literally closed doors (he even films a private video diary) but does not give us a clear reason for documenting these scenes in the first place. As viewers, we wonder less if they actually committed the crimes than why they would film the destruction that came after them. His camera gave his family of performers a viewer, but the effect was more than just the addition of an audience. In an attempt to capture his family naturally in action, David ultimately created what the camera saw. His filming, in turn, creates a circular logic: what he intended to record with his camera was, in fact, constructed by the camera, creating a reality that otherwise would have not existed.

One cannot address David's camera without first considering the family's circumstances. As the documentary shows, the Friedmans were responsible for an array of home video and photography almost larger than

their own story. There were not only the typical birthday-cake moments and baby pictures from the past caught on camera, but also many not-so-sugar-coated family arguments and uncomfortable dialogue amidst the family's legal trouble. After Elaine, Arnold's wife and mother of the three children, does not support her accused husband, the two sides argue constantly, often while the camera is rolling. In contrast, we also see moments of awkward happiness: Arnold dancing with his sons in the basement during his house arrest, the brothers staying up all night before Jesse's guilty plea, and Jesse joking around on the courtroom stairs before he goes to jail. This voluminous and unusual range of footage inevitably raises the question: why were they so devoted to filming?

One can't help but ask this question since the footage captures things that are hardly enjoyable to revisit. However, from the viewpoint of the family, it seems that they filmed for the same basic reason that most other families record home video: future memory. The night before Jesse goes to jail, for example, David is wearing the documentary filmmaker hat, interviewing Jesse:

> Jesse: Today is the day before I went to jail—
>
> David: Went to jail? Because we are watching it?
>
> Jesse: Yeah, went, because we will be watching this after I am already out of jail.

Here, Jesse is consciously altering his verb tenses to satisfy the future viewer, which he assumes will be the family. They are using the video as a tool for remembering everything as they want it to be; all of what they do and say at the time purposely tailor this memory. While discussing this piece of home video in retrospect, David furthers this claim, saying,

> I shut the tape because I didn't want to remember it myself . . . it's a possibility . . . because I don't really remember it outside of the tape. . . like when your parents take pictures of you. . . do you remember being there or do you remember the photograph hanging on the wall?

This is proof that David and his brothers were consciously aware of the video's effect on their memories. Instead of in their brains, their memory resides in the video camera—because that is the only place where they can choose what to remember and how to remember it.

In this way, David exemplifies a modern psychological phenomenon: the video camera lets the person believe that the recording is indeed what he remembers, when, in fact, he only remembers it through the recording. In the essay "Familiar Pursuits, Editorial Acts: Documentaries after the Age of Home Video," Marsha and David Orgeron agree that memory gets a helping hand from film, claiming that "personal memory is made tangible . . . when a visual record appears to substantiate it" (47). They insist that video records do not exist alongside personal memory but take on the form of personal memory itself. Not only does video "substantiate" personal memories, but it also has permanence on which the temporary personal memory relies. In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes, "After the event ha[s] ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality it would never otherwise have enjoyed" (11). In other words, while memory is ephemeral, photography and video both freeze it and make it worth freezing; Sontag believes that these moments only become important because the camera generates that importance. With Jesse talking to David in the basement about future events in past tense and David shutting off the camera to disallow the memory, they are writing in stone what would otherwise be written in chalk—or not even written at all.

Although it seems as though the Friedmans are filming for the sole purpose of helping to remember, this does not explain why they would record family arguments. Who would want to preserve the moment of the entire family in chaos? When it comes to these moments that most people would rather forget, David must have a reason for filming other than for the sake of remembering. Marsha and David Orgeron attempt to answer the question:,"Aggressive, confrontational, and propagandistic at the microscopic level, David's videography teases out familial chaos in search of affirmation of his own beliefs" (53). They maintain that David's real motive behind the camera was to elicit—by provoking conflict and argument—confirmation of his mother's guilt and his father's innocence. Throughout the story, the brothers continually blame their mother for not standing behind the family, and David looks to prove that point with his camera. For example, when Arnold is home on house arrest to prepare for his trial, David convinces his father on camera that Elaine has betrayed them:

> Mommy believes you did it and she believes that you should go to jail and she believes that she should deserves everything that's left and you shouldn't have any part of it . . . We lived with her for two months while you were in jail and we learned not to trust her.

These very beliefs lead David to seek visual evidence of his mother's wrongdoing. An example of this evidence is the night before Jesse is to enter his guilty plea: the three brothers are in the house helping him pack and sharing some last moments with him. But the brothers also share a heated moment with their mother, which was, not surprisingly, recorded on tape. While the brothers are sitting around in the basement, Elaine comes downstairs only to demand that her children leave first thing in the morning. The children hostilely snap back, much for the purpose of the camera:

> David: We're here for Jesse—
>
> Elaine: I don't give a shit why you're here. . . I want you out of this house tomorrow morning.
>
> David: Can't you put your anger aside for one minute?
>
> Elaine: I cannot put my anger aside about you. You have been nothing but hateful, hostile, and angry ever since this began!

The brothers capitalize on a key moment to frame their mother as being against her family. The pieces of home video such as this one seemingly try to find her in a culpable state and to record it, almost for the sole purpose of proving their mother's guilt to whoever comes across the film.

Although David's desire for "affirmation of his own beliefs" leads him to take footage, this very desire directly affects the footage itself, ironically nullifying his reasons for filming. He wants to remember what happened through the camera and to show evidence of his mother's wrongdoings; however, he actually creates the memories by provoking his mother. The camera ends up filming only what the camera itself creates—the majority of the home video clips show the subjects and events behaving either for or in response to the camera. Even some of the home video footage taken years before shows Arnold or the children speaking to the camera and into a microphone. In one clip, the extended family is

sitting around the backyard when Arnold proclaims, "The whole family assembled! Great Neck, New York!" They are acting solely to entertain the camera, as their behavior undoubtedly would not have existed without it. Susan Sontag advances this idea, maintaining that photography is its own life force, not reliant upon the subject in the lens. She writes, "A photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer; picture-taking is an event in itself" (11). When people stop what they are doing and pose for a picture or, like Arnold, stop and announce the event to a video camera, the recording becomes its own entity. It is not catching the subjects as they act, but eliciting an action from them. The Friedmans exemplify this principle the night before Jesse is to enter his guilty plea, when David literally interviews Jesse on camera. When asked about the situation at hand, Jesse replies solemnly, "I am in the worst scenario possible." Later on, while they are getting ready in the morning, David asks, "Jesse, what are you thinking?" to which Jesse replies, "I'm not." Conversations like these display the family as if they are already making a documentary of themselves. By questioning and adding input, David creates his own event for the camera; instead of being a *cinéma-vérité* "fly on the wall,"—which ostensibly would have no input or effect whatsoever—David is what the Orgerons call a "'fly-in-the-face'" (51).

Because the Friedmans' actions were generated by and for the camera, it might be easy to render their collection of home video as "Reality TV." In most reality televisions shows, the camera is creating something, such as an argument or an emotional conversation, for the audience's entertainment. Indeed, Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* is troubled by how closely the Friedmans compare to the average reality television subject. In his 2003 review of the movie, Turan asks, "Is morbid curiosity. . . any excuse for intruding on and making a spectacle of these people's lives?" Bothered by their exploitation, Turan questions the way Jarecki represented the Friedmans and claims that the space between the Friedmans and reality television is "smaller than we are comfortable accepting." Although similarities exist between the family's volatile home video and the typical reality television show, there are a couple of essential differences. In most reality television shows, the camera crew consists of outsiders employed by the network. However, in the Friedman home, the cameraman is somebody from within the family, and the camera itself becomes almost like

another family member. The intrusion that Turan is concerned about in the Friedmans' case is actually minimal compared to a family on a reality show; as a result, the Friedmans' footage is less invasive and less fabricated. In addition, the Friedmans are unique in that they are undeniably a family of performers. In the movie, David remembers with admiration one of his father's decisions: instead of using his engineering degree from Columbia University, he chose to travel to Canada to play in his band. Even David works as one of the most highly regarded professional clowns in New York City. Turan criticizes the fact that the documentary is "making a spectacle" of the family, but the family members are, in fact, making this spectacle of themselves, self-producing "The Friedman Show."

David ultimately invalidates his intentions to film by constructing the events that he seeks to capture. His camera is a tool to create memories and evidence of his beliefs; the act of recording gives birth to these events, rendering his documentation of true reality null and void. In the opening song of the movie, Buck Owens sings with irony, "They're gonna put me in the movies . . . and all I gotta do is act naturally." This idea cannot be further from the reality in the Friedman home, with David and his camera affecting and adding significance to every move. In his attempt to "capture the Friedmans," David actually changes the Friedmans and records their altered behavior. Although David's official occupation is a clown, he is essentially a *cinéma vérité* provocateur; the credits list Andrew Jarecki as the director of the movie, but David Friedman was recording long before Jarecki came along.

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