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AMERICAN MOM

by

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The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “mother” as: of, relating to, or being a mother; acting as or providing a parental stock. For Catherine Weiss, being a mother meant loving, caring for, and giving inexhaustible attention to her 13 children, beginning when she was only four years old. Catherine Weiss received her first American Girl Doll in 2002 on a thanksgiving weekend in New York City from her great-grandmother, Paula. Kirstin, her first doll and “child” soon became apart of a family of 13 as Catherine continued receiving children throughout the next nine years.

While the company American Girl intended to create a product to inspire strong femininity and instill “girl power” in thousands of young girls across the country, it instead gave Catherine an escape from her outside world and into a fantasy of her own creation. To the lay outsider, Catherine had an imagination that pushed the limits of normality, but to herself she was merely another single mother in America (as she left her husband Daniel due to him being an unfit father). My film “American Mom” is a short piece dedicated to telling Catherine’s story through the juxtaposition of old home videos and present day interviews. Beyond her make-believe story itself, the film explores Catherine’s experience as a mother, her reflections of those experiences, her incredible imagination and how it helped her develop, and the difficulty of telling someone else’s story.

Before addressing the film itself, I would like to outline some theory of imaginative play and its relation to child development. One of the most quintessential aspects of childhood, the freedom of pretend play captures the imaginations of children across all backgrounds to explore, cope with, and expand

their understandings of the social worlds around them. Whether it be through make-believing home life, survivor, or doctor, children enjoy the luxury of leaving their own physical worlds behind and entering the complexities of another, in which every movement is in their control. According to Curran (1999), children engage in play for a number of reasons potentially unbeknownst to them: play is arousal seeking and an instinctual need to exert energy; is a preparation of the child for adult behavior; and is a reflection of a child's desire to produce effects in their environment. Though definitions of pretend play (also referred to as role-play, fantasy play, symbolic play, dramatic play, or pretense) differ across theorists and literatures, it is generally accepted as the expression of internal processes in external actions (Vigotsky, 1976; Stagnitti & Unsworth, 2003), children participating freely and self-guiding using themes from their perceptions of their social environments (Gmitrova, Podhajecka, & Gmitrov, 2009). Through pretending, a child knowingly and intentionally projects a mentally represented thought, feeling, or understanding onto a present situation (Lillard et al, 2012). Important characterizations of pretend play involve social dialogues, negotiation, role taking, and improvisation, requiring a child's ability to symbolically transform objects and actions.

Research on the many cognitive and social benefits of pretend play has been very consistent, generally providing evidence for the importance of pretense on the developing child. Commonly accepted benefits of pretend play are the formation of conceptual distinctions between object and action and the self and other; understanding of social rules and roles; and skills for peer negotiation and conflict

resolution (Doyle & Connolly, 1989; Rubin & Maino, 1975). *American Mom* attempts to tackle these phenomena through the lens of Catherine and her children, as through her imagined family she was able to live out her every fantasy. For example, in an interview, Catherine expresses how through creating the lives of all her children, she was thus constantly taking the perspectives of others and becoming more empathetic as a result, truly understanding the vast differences in mental states and behaviors of humans. More so, caught on camera, she realizes her creation of the 13 characters was a mere reflection of herself, putting her own fears, dreams, or personalities into each child.

As for the film itself, “American Mom” falls into the category of a participatory documentary as, I, the filmmaker, am a visibly active participant throughout the film via audible comments during interviews and physically appearing in much of the footage shown. I struggled for some time deciding whether or not I should include an interview of myself, as Catherine’s sister, in the film, as I have commentary from our parents’ throughout. In the end though, I felt some of the beauty of the film lied in my making of it, as Catherine’s sister helping her independently reflect on her past as a young mother and that direct commentary from me was not necessary.

A crucial aspect of my film is the use of old home videos, shot mainly by my father throughout our lives. Filming constantly even before my sister and I were born, my father has created an archive so immense that *American Mom* is only one of hundreds of stories that could be pulled out and explored. In their article “Familial Pursuits, Editorial Acts: Documentaries after the Age of Home Video”

Marsha Orgeron and Devin Orgeron explore the use of home video in *Capturing the Friedman's* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003), *Tarnation* (Jonathon Caouette, 2003), and *Grizzly Man* (Werner-Herzog, 2005). According to them, one cannot begin to address these films without first exploring and understanding the emergence of home videos into recent documentaries. In a review of this article, Benjamin Eisin states:

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.

For my father, recording these videos became an artistic means to capture both wonderful and mundane moments of our everyday lives. As he filmed everyone who might have come into our lives, family, friends, acquaintances, he captured the discomfort of being on camera of some and brought out the egotistical performers in others. *American Mom* could not have been what it was without these videos.

As stated above, *Capturing the Friedman's* used personal home video as a means of explanation and exploration, and thus influenced the creation of my own film. Though worlds apart in content, subject matter, and style, *Capturing the Friedman's* is driven by home video taken by the family themselves. Following a family falling apart after an investigation of child pornography, Andrew Jarecki seamlessly tells their story through present day narrations juxtaposed with old home video shot by the family. As Orgeron and Orgeron explain, "the home movies

in *Capturing the Friedman's*—of birthday parties, children growing up—are typical of the genre: their visual register of cheerful familial togetherness offers a stark contrast to the contemporary images of this family captured by the video camera.” As we watch father and son Friedman in present day police investigations and courtroom hearings, we continuously are taken back to simpler times when their family was a typical depiction of the American family. The typical depiction of the American family was not, though, what it used to be—was not how it was once portrayed.

Orgeron and Orgeron outline an important shift in home “movies” to what we now recognize as home “video.”

Where home *movies* have been characterized as providing highly selective, idealized glimpses of family life, as Patricia Zimmerman and Richard Chalfen demonstrate in their respective studies, home *videos*, particularly as they operate in these three films, provide an archival representation that goes beyond the iconography of picture-perfect birthday parties and Christmas mornings.

In *American Mom* and *Capturing the Friedman's*, the clips shown perfectly showcase this shift. For example, in Jarecki's film, we see family dinners wrought with conflict and tension and the beginnings of a failing marriage caught live as it was occurring. In my own film, the clips shown are of an equal caliber, not in negativity but in “truth,” with clips of Catherine just as she was. While my father did capture those “perfect” family moments of celebrations and menorah lightings, they were not performed; they feel authentic as his obsession with the camera went beyond those moments to reveal the “trueness” of our family life. In capturing the beautiful moment of opening presents on Christmas morning, his refusal to turn off the camera too soon results in our enjoyment of watching a young Catherine peak

underneath her pajama pants before asking him to run upstairs and get her some underwear. As Orgeron and Orgeron state, “the medium does not, in other words, determine the message so much as it allows the message to be recorded and revealed.” By leaving the camera rolling, moments are merely captured and not created or defined.

Beyond the obvious polarity of subject matter, *Capturing the Friedman's* and *American Mom* have a very important distinction, the filmmaker's relation to the story itself. One being an outside and the other being the ultimate insider, Andrew Jarecki and myself experienced very different challenges and successes in telling our stories. Here, it becomes important to talk about the role of the filmmaker and editor as a manipulator of a story, especially when working with home video not shot by the filmmaker themselves. As with all films, the director in the end does take all creative licenses, telling the story the way they perceived. It is difficult, though, to assume this position when working with personal familial archives because as Orgeron and Orgeron rightfully proclaim “as raw material, personal video footage imposes certain representational boundaries upon the documentary filmmaker, even if it opens up others.” For example, they state, “only Jarecki's editorial intervention in this film---both in terms of juxtaposition and narration---re-signifies the seemingly ‘innocent’ home movie images.”

Their term “editorial intervention” especially stands out to me, as through putting narration over previously undefined footage, the message of the footage is changed and reflects the editor's own perception of the event. They go on to explain “in doing so, the documentary direction assumes the role of editor and interpreter of

a prerecorded, personal moving image archive that has already been edited, always conceptually and sometimes literally.” Though I was personally connected to the footage used and manipulated in *American Mom*, most of the home video I did not shoot myself; it was my father’s footage. As an editor of this film, and thus of my father’s footage, I, in a sense, took on the role of a third party outsider. While I did shoot the interviews myself, I took creative license over the appearance of all the home video.

This concept of editing someone else’s work brings about the complications of telling someone else’s story: me sharing Catherine’s experience instead of Catherine herself. While I was and am directly involved in the life and children of Catherine Weiss, it was not my life and they were not my children; it is not my story. Not only was it not my story, but the story itself held secrets Catherine might not have been ready to be so fully open about. With this obstacle, I worked closely with Catherine, as I assume Jarecki did with the Friedman’s, letting her know the direction of the film and showing her cuts before making finalizations. Of course, it was still my film and she had little influence over it in the end, but I think her direct participation with the film process not only helped guide the story but also helped her assuage her anxieties about this entrancing story being told. Interestingly though, I think this brings about another interesting aspect of the film: the moment caught on film versus conflicting perceptions of the moment; Catherine’s story versus my telling of her story.

As I interviewed my own family, I believe I created another layer of home video. Though not candid, it still reflected the conversations between family

members. *American Mom* then also becomes a collaboration of a family, four members reflecting on potentially the most memorable aspect of my and Catherine's childhood. Through interviews with my parents, I believe the film offers a further developed look into Catherine's life as a mother of 13. The film makes it clear that as her familial backstory became more and more extensive and in-depth over time, so did the relationships between her own parents and her "children." Forced to allow the children to sit at the kitchen table for dinner or come on vacations (whether in the car or on a plane), Anne Stewart and Danny Weiss took on the role of grandparents far earlier than they ever expected. I chose to leave their interview uncut, allowing their reflections in the moment of recording to remain. In trying to remember, for example, how old Catherine was when she received her first doll, we watch the bicker through silent pauses and eye rolls. Personally, I love how this follows the style of home video itself, catching the "real" moments amidst the prompted or intentional ones.

Though brief, my six minute and twenty-two second cut attempts to tackle each of the many facets of Catherine's story. Coherently flowing, I believe the piece has an air of humor, nostalgia, and conflict, while also addressing the psychological factors that go into imagination and the immense cognitive and social benefit pretend play has on the developing child. Spending hours scrolling through my favorite website "Free Music Archive" I found a collection of songs in the same style but evoking different sensations. A friend who watched the film before it was finalized, said the film with the help of the music took her through a cycle of multiple emotions: laughing at Catherine's imagination, recognizing the nostalgia of

everyone involved, and feeling the sadness that this part of Catherine's life is over and forever in the past. This comment is exactly what I want this film to do, evoke emotion. Though potentially unknown the average viewer, Catherine's story is even more in depth than what was shown, with husbands, boyfriends, and complicated family dynamics between the children. Not only is there more of her story, there are more interviews with Anne and Danny, home video of the dolls, and a present day visit to the American Girl Doll story in LA which only brought about more complexities of Catherine's motherhood.

This being said, I will be continuing my film, as I believe it has the potential to be a full-length film and, as I saw during the screening, instill joy in its viewers. As I continue to work on *American Mom* each theme will become more fleshed out and captivating. The film ends with a "to be continued," with the intension of promoting excitement for the future piece while also leaving Catherine's story open for interpretation, as well as forcing me to finish it. I plan to conduct more interviews with Catherine and potentially other family members who show up in in the home videos. With extensive and vivid descriptions of each child---their entrance into the family, their likes and dislikes, and their relationships with their siblings--- and humorous yet conflicting descriptions of past events from Catherine and our parents, I believe the film must continue. In fact, I plan on submitting the short piece for funding to continue my project and have researched some organizations that look to help new filmmakers.

Beyond *American Mom*, I would love to continue pulling together films of the endless home videos my father has collected over the years. I can imagine traveling

around the country and interviewing those showcased in the videos, having them reflect on past experiences of which I have in the flesh. The idea of documentation and memory is fascinating, as through these unedited home videos, I have the truth that some might have forgotten, or remembered differently. As it could be argued, “who cares” about someone’s random family, it is the juxtaposition of the moments themselves and the reflections we have of them presently that bring the stories to life. In his book “Better Home Movies,” Roy Pinney states, “in our lexicon a mediocre movie is one that only your family can enjoy. A good movie can entertain an audience that doesn’t know the actors.” If curated correctly, I believe the characters depicted in my father’s films can do just that. *American Mom* is only the beginning.

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