



# Thematic Program Family Affairs

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## FINAL TITLE

### Ross McElwee

Documentary cameras have long courted danger. Recently, they've been hauled onto the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, slipped behind the fences of polluting oil companies in Ecuador, smuggled into sweatshop factories in China, disguised in order to film ecological disaster in Tanzania, smuggled into brothels to document child prostitution in India, and brandished in the streets during crackdowns by government troops in Iran. But perhaps the most challenging place to try to film is within the realm of your own family. The danger of doing so is, of course, not physical but emotional. The challenge is to present a portrait of your own family with honesty and sensitivity—honoring the people you grew up with, the people who raised you, or tried to—while also occasionally revealing details and character traits that may be depressing, unsavory, or just plain sad. Filmmakers have to achieve fairness in how they portray the people in their lives. The ten films in this program explore, in different ways, the delicate terrain along the fault line of family.

There are, of course, countless documentaries about American families—the PBS series *An American Family* by Craig Gilbert and Alan and Susan Raymond and *Capturing the Friedmans* by Andrew Jarecki are two celebrated examples. Though these were films about families—families coming apart at the seams—they were not films about the families of the filmmakers. They were about other people's families. The documentaries selected for this program are a kind of autobiographical subset of a larger documentary category, and thus exhibit a whole additional layer of emotional, psychological, and aesthetic complexity. The viewer of these films must not only consider what is happening before the camera but also how events portrayed in the film are connected to the person behind it—the filmmaker who also happens to be a daughter, a son, or a parent. To understate the matter, this complicates things considerably. I speak from personal experience.

I believe one of the reasons I was asked to curate Full Frame's thematic program on family films is that for over thirty years I have been making films that at least partially feature my own family. My films have ostensibly dealt with numerous social and political issues—nuclear weapons proliferation, racism, the U.S.-Soviet Cold War face-off in Berlin, the corrosive effects of television news programming, big tobacco, U.S. support of a South American dictatorship. But *au fond*, my films have been about family, my own family. I have used my own life as a

prism through which to view the complex world in which we live, and one of the things that stabilized me in finding my perspective was having a family.

I loved being married, loved having children. In my documentaries *Time Indefinite*, *Six O’Clock News*, *Bright Leaves*, and *In Paraguay*, I felt compelled to film as a way to celebrate the whole wonderful, messy enterprise of having and sustaining a family. Even my most recent film, *Photographic Memory*, which concerns a spring I spent in France long before I married, is set in motion by my maddening relationship with my teenage son. Throughout my filmmaking, I have been acutely aware of the murky and miraculous continuity of familial generations—great grandfathers, grandfathers, fathers, and sons; grandmothers, mothers, wives, and daughters. Using this web of generational relationships as my safety net, I was happy to get on a trapeze and reach for answers to those ultimately unanswerable questions of creation and purpose.

But suddenly, I do not have a family. Or to be more precise, my family has been completely reconfigured.

I was married for twenty-two years but am recently divorced. Suddenly, my son lives with me, and my daughter lives with my ex-wife. Not one family; two half-families. I am reeling. One of my films, *Time Indefinite*, devotes many scenes to the preparations leading up to my wedding and the ceremony itself. I have not been able to look at that film since my divorce, but what would it mean for me to view it now? For a viewer who did not know that our wedding vows, uttered with such conviction in the film, have been abandoned, annulled, revoked, the film would play exactly as it always has. Funny in some places, occasionally annoying in others (when the filmmaker can’t put his camera down), and at its best, sometimes moving and poignant.

If I were to watch it now, it would be a completely different film—as different as if it had been reshot, reedited, and given a different voice-over narration. There is now no way that I can read the film the way I used to read it—it was made by another Ross living a different life. Like an anthropological film made about a tribe that no longer exists, *Time Indefinite*, at least in terms of my marriage, is an ethnography of extinct emotions.

I chose the ten films in this program because they are good and courageous, often fascinating, efforts at probing the mystery of family. An eleventh film—*Time Indefinite*—plays invisibly alongside them, and I am still pondering what meaning it can have for me—or for anyone who sees it—now that it’s context has been utterly transmuted. The films offer other directions, different road maps, alternate resolutions, and almost all of them redeem the importance of family. In the introduction to *Time Indefinite*, I quote my mother, who said to me more than once, “Everything begins and ends with family.” I guess I still believe that, and these wonderful films deliver that message in distinct and surprising ways.

*Family Portrait Settings* and *Time Exposure* [typesetting note: use ital. no bf for subheads, for more ongoing, interconnected narrative?]

Two parents sit on a sofa in their living room and patiently answer their son's questions as he films them, his camera locked down on a tripod. It's an unassuming approach to making a subtle and complex documentary film, one that tells the story of three generations of the filmmaker's family.

William Rothman, writing about Alfred Guzzetti's *Family Portrait Settings* in a 1977 issue of *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, notes that it is one of the earliest examples of family documentary in which the filmmaker trains his camera and his talents on his own family. Rothman goes on to write about how Guzzetti confronts several important questions in his film: "How might this filmmaker, from his place within the family, create a film which speaks with authority on such issues as: What does it mean to be a member of a family? What does it mean to make a documentary film? Even: What does it mean to know a person?" These questions apply to all of the films selected for this program but especially to *Family Portrait Settings*.

The deep intelligence and technological rigor that guides the structuring of this film does not overshadow the extreme affection and respect the filmmaker feels for his parents, as well as the other members of his family who appear in the film. Yet Guzzetti avoids sentimentalizing his family—by simply allowing his parents to talk at their own pace, in long unedited shots, we sense not only his parents' bond but also the tensions that exist between them. This gives the viewer time to absorb the nuance of what is being said, and how body language signals so much about his mother and father's regard for each other.

One beautifully constructed passage begins with a slow pan of a front yard from the second-story window of the filmmaker's former home in South Philadelphia—a modest row house. The shot is in black-and-white 16mm, and as the slow pan arrives at the front gate to the small yard, there is a sudden cut to Kodachrome footage of a shot taken from precisely the same angle, vantage point, and focal length. The color film (authored by Alfred's father) captures a little girl, Alfred's sister, opening the gate and entering the yard. Over these connected shots, we hear the voice recording of Alfred's mother reflecting on turning sixty: "Something happened from age forty to where I am now. How did twenty years pass by? I never realized it. And suddenly I have a sixtieth birthday and realize it." The pan continues in black and white and stops appropriately on a slightly out of focus shot of the siding of the neighbor's house. Laced with straightforward complexities, *Family Portrait Settings* is as quietly affecting as any family documentary I have ever seen.

*Time Exposure* is a delicately touching—even elegiac—coda to *Family Portrait Sitings*. It deconstructs a single photograph taken by the filmmaker’s father, Felix Guzzetti, an amateur photographer, some seven decades earlier. Perhaps *elegiac* is too lofty an adjective, given that the film is so beautifully situated in the fundamental everyday questions of human existence. Paul Gauguin posed these questions in titling one of his paintings: *D’où Venons Nous, Que Sommes Nous, Où Allons Nous*. *Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?* These are the same questions that *Time Exposure*, in its precise and understated way, is asking. As Alfred Guzzetti says at the end of the film, he is “endlessly fascinated by the way film puts before us the passing of time.”

The last shots of *Time Exposure* show us the frontispiece of a book entitled *Elementary Photography*, with its inscription, “To Felix, from Sue.” Those four words, inscribed seventy-six years ago, gently convey the ebb and flow, the to and from, of life, and the tenderness that is sometimes possible to find therein.

### *Diaries*

The unassuming title of this documentary belies what is, I think, one of the most remarkable nonfiction films ever made. From 1971 through 1976, Ed Pincus recorded, on 16mm film, episodes of his life with his wife, Jane, their two young children, and the several women with whom Ed had love affairs. It’s also a portrait of a particular era—the early 1970s, or perhaps, more accurately, the post-1960s—a time in which a willingness to experiment in life, love, and political expression, was still present, but in the culture at large, was on the wane.

The title is as unadorned and direct as the film itself. Appropriate, too, is the title’s inference that the film’s content would normally not be intended for the eyes of outsiders. However, what I experienced when I first saw *Diaries* was not a sense of voyeurism but of privileged intimacy.

Ed films Jane lying on their bed, looking very unhappy. It’s a weird shot, a kind of horizontal monologue, in which her face fills the screen. She confesses to her husband, “I feel my privacy has been invaded. . . . I feel like I can’t be myself. I feel like I’m sacrificing myself for your film.” This is a painful indictment; it makes us squirm. We feel alienated from the filmmaker, who seems merciless in his determination to keep filming. Ed could easily have edited this scene out, but moments like this are part of the reason the film has such emotional complexity and integrity. In the long run (and the film *is* long), we become bonded to Ed and his vision, partially because of his willingness to show his dark side.

This is not to say the film is dark. In fact, it's luminous in its depiction of the intricate weave of everyday life. Meals are prepared, a child is taken to the doctor, a puppy is acquired, Jane's father comes to visit, Ed attends a wedding, the puppy becomes a dog. The mundane becomes transcendent. This unending stream of activities with friends and family is the evanescent backdrop for Ed and Jane's willingness to redefine what it means to be married, to create a family, and what it means to expose this chaotic, and lovely, experiment to a camera.

I first saw rushes from *Diaries* when I was a graduate student in the late 1970s. *Diaries* was unlike anything I had ever seen. I found it iconoclastic and inspiring. Not yet married myself, I felt the film was a daring attempt to fuse art and real life.

Fifteen years after I first saw *Diaries*, I saw it again in a Sundance retrospective. This time I, like the Ed in *Diaries*, was married and had two young children. I had firsthand experience of the snarls, confusions, and pleasures of marriage and family life. I sat there transfixed, watching a different film, one that was much more complicated than the film I had seen when I was single. And in the raw aftermath of my divorce, I will see the film again here at Full Frame, and I am sure it will resonate for me in an entirely new way.

Ed has described his work as an attempt to reconcile the trivial with the deep and to probe the fragility and heroism of everyday life. *Diaries* continues to inspire a number of documentarians, including myself, to strive for those same reconciliations and revelations. After finishing it, he told me that *Diaries* would be his last film, that he had said everything he needed to say as a filmmaker. (After more than twenty years, Ed came out of retirement to co-direct *Axe in the Attic* with Lucia Small, which was selected for Full Frame in 2008).

### *51 Birch Street*

"I never intended to make it as a film," Block told *Indiewire* back in 2005 when *51 Birch Street* was first released. "My parents were married fifty-three years, then my mother died pretty unexpectedly, and about three months later I got a call from my father in Florida to announce that he's living with his secretary from forty years ago."

That was the springboard Doug needed to begin constructing his remarkable, and remarkably candid, portrait of his parents' marriage—the true dimensions of which were only revealed after Doug discovered three boxes containing his mother's diaries. The film consists of excerpts from the diaries, home movies, and footage that Doug shoots of his father as he packs up the house to move to Florida.

*51 Birch Street* shares more than a few themes with another film in this program, *Must Read After My Death*—namely the discovery of caches of previously "secret" parental

documents—but a primary difference is that in the latter, Morgan Dews is appalled and fascinated but silent as he reflects on his grandparents and the suburban hell they created for themselves in Connecticut. Doug Block, on the other hand, is very much a character in his film—even appearing on camera, in home movies and the present, as he conducts a post-mortem assessment of his mother’s diaries and letters, and gently confronts a father who seems not to miss his deceased wife.

Doug has often said of his film that perhaps when it comes to one’s own parents, ignorance is bliss. His life would certainly have been much simpler if he had not happened to come across his mother’s tragically stark and scathing journals, but Doug more than rises to the occasion as a documentary filmmaker; he attains an openness and honesty in his filmmaking that would have made his mother proud.

### *Must Read After My Death*

When his grandmother died in 2001, Morgan Dews stumbled upon an astonishing family archive in the basement of the house where his grandparents had lived. Charley and Allis Dews left behind 201 home movie reels and dozens of Dictaphone and audio recordings. With deft editing, the everydayness of the home movies is cruelly undercut by the content of audio letters that were exchanged between husband and wife during Charlie’s extensive travels to Australia, where he worked for an insurance company.

In this pre-Internet and cell phone era, the scratchy quality of both the film images and voice recordings have a haunting effect. Charley, an amateur cameraman, was determined to document a falsely cheerful version of his family’s life, while his wife explored the darker side of that life on tape. When juxtaposed, the effect is, in places, devastating.

Charley spent four months of every year in Australia. In the recordings, sent home to his wife and kids, he seems detached, and it’s not just the geographical distance. “I love you kids. I haven’t been a very good father. I am sorry I get so angry so often, but you really do need to be neater in the ways you keep your bedrooms.” Father knows best, or perhaps not.

Messy bedrooms are the least of the family’s problems. Charley is determined to have an open marriage—highly unusual for the 1950s—and Allis is constantly second-guessing her decision to stay with him. But with the ballast of four children to raise while her husband is off galavanting on the other side of the globe, she doesn’t have much of a choice. Her recordings are poignant in their refusal to accept her psychiatrist’s assessment that she “needs to conform” to her husband’s expectations: “I love my children and I want to be a good mother, but I’m not one to sit at home and paint and sew. I’m not a housewife, I’ve never been a housewife.”

The film creates an undertone of impending cataclysm as the family prospers and moves to bigger and bigger houses in the Connecticut suburbs. “You’re doing a wonderful job of raising the kids,” intones Charley to his wife in one recording. But then he goes on to torture her a little about how much he loves dancing with the women of Australia, how charming they are. During one of these boastful moments, the film cuts to peacocks preening in footage that Charley filmed in a zoo—a little heavy-handed, perhaps, but it serves the purpose, inserted as it is among all the prosaic footage of cars and houses and parties in Connecticut.

One by one, the kids get into trouble at school and Mom begins to become unhinged. When Charley does come home from his travels, he drinks too much and the parents argue bitterly. These arguments are somehow captured on the family tape recorder. Bad situations worsen, fueled by the ill-informed professional advice Allis receives from her therapist—and then, there are the children’s further misadventures, and a death.

I remember when I first saw this film at the Rotterdam Film Festival; at a certain point, I just stopped taking notes and sat there as wave after wave of incredibly sad revelations—many of them unconscious on the part of the wife, rendered in her plaintive voice—washed over the audience in the darkness.

Toward the end of the film there is a conversation in which Charley confides, “Someone warned me that my wife might try to poison me, and I replied that if she gave poison to me, I would gladly take it because it would be better than being married to her.”

### *In Search of Our Fathers*

Marco Williams didn’t know his father’s name until he was twenty-four. Shot over a period of seven years, *In Search of Our Fathers* (1992) explores what it means to be fatherless. As he tries to gather information about his dad, Marco interviews four generations of women in his family who raised families on their own. But none of the women—his mother, grandmother, various aunts, cousin, all of whom have raised or are raising kids alone—seem particularly angry or upset by the absence of husbands and fathers in their lives. They just seem to accept it as a natural way of life, which is one of the most startling things the film uncovers.

Most of the film centers on Marco’s mom, Winnie, who is evasive throughout about who Marco’s father is. Marco finally persuades her to sit down in front of the camera and have a conversation with him about his dad, only to have the tape recorder malfunction, resulting in a talking head who is painfully silent. This tech snafu is completely emblematic of Marco’s dilemma; his voice-over comes in and paraphrases his mother’s monologue *ex post facto* in a scene that is both humorous and heartbreaking.



There is a question that hangs over the film: Does Marco really want to find his father and have that long-postponed father-son rapprochement? One senses a double-negative force field at work here: The father doesn't want to find the son, and the son seems hesitant to go full throttle in search for his father. This push-pull is one of the most compelling aspects of the film.

Having finally tracked down his father's name and phone number, Marco steps up his efforts to reunite with his dad. They talk over the phone and make plans to meet, but his father repeatedly breaks the appointments. Marco leaves phone messages, but his father doesn't return his calls. The film is organized into chronological chapters roughly corresponding to the places Marco was living during the seven years the movie took to make: Cambridge, Harlem, Paris, and then back in Cambridge. This peripatetic, circular structure echoes Marco's own circling as he tries to pin down not just who his father is but his own identity and his feelings about having been without a father for so long.

### *Intimate Stranger and Translating Edwin Honig*

The intimate stranger in question is Alan Berliner's grandfather, Joseph Cassutto, an enigmatic figure who politely abandoned his wife and children in Brooklyn eleven months out of the year to live in postwar Japan, where he worked as an export consultant, and where he apparently felt more at home.

Cassutto left behind hundreds of letters and photographs and even some film footage of himself in Japan and other distant locations, and Alan's virtuosic use of these artifacts brings this story to kinetic life. Berliner uses voice-overs from family members to comment on his grandfather's life. Some of them, including Alan's father, Oscar, are clearly hostile toward Cassutto and disparage him for shirking his duties to the family. Others are kinder in their assessment of his wanderings, but at the heart of the film there remains the implication that this was a family man who was in no way suited to have a family.

Alan Berliner has said the film walks "a fine line between sorting the dirty family laundry and polishing the precious family jewel." At one juncture in the film there is stock footage of microscopic sperm trying to find their way into an egg, indicating that Berliner is not uninterested in how his grandfather's waywardness relates to his own existence. Alan is, after all, the offspring of this scion—but following up on this question is not the main intent of the film. The act of sorting and polishing is. The joyful and playful use of montage, the animated clack of a typewriter that punctuates the soundtrack (which alludes to the autobiography his grandfather was working on when he died), signaling divisions between "chapters," gives *Intimate Stranger* an energy and drive that is a pleasure to experience.

*Intimate Stranger* is followed by the short film *Translating Edwin Honig: A Poet's Alzheimer's*, a portrait of the esteemed poet and translator who taught at Brown University. Edwin Honig, both Cassutto's nephew and Berliner's cousin, died of complications from Alzheimer's last June.

### *My Father, the Genius*

In *My Father, the Genius*, Lucia Small takes on the prickly subject of her talented and visionary but maddeningly narcissistic father, the architect Glen Small. Lucia reveals the damage wrought upon her two sisters, her mother, and herself by her father's ambition, absence from family life, and dalliances with other women, yet the film was not made as an act of revenge. Glen Small "commissioned" his daughter to write his biography, but instead she made a documentary—this documentary. While there is anger in her filmmaking, of course, there is also a kind of hesitant love for her father, and a desire to understand him better if not reconcile with him.

Lucia describes her film as an attempt to explore "the precarious framework on which a career and family are built. How does a man dedicate his entire life to 'saving the world through architecture,' yet miss some basics at home? How does one balance creative obsession with familial obligations? And how does a filmmaker daughter balance her father's wishes with her own artistic vision?"

In the film, Lucia deftly weaves together the ironies, passions, resentments, and muted love that are all bound up in being her father's daughter.

### *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern*

Most of the films in this program depict families beset by problems and crises from within—unfaithful fathers, unhappy mothers, rebellious and angry children. What makes Jeanne Jordan and Steven Ascher's *Troublesome Creek* different is its tremendous affirmation of a family pulling together in the face of adversity—in this case, the threat of losing the family farm to foreclosure. Though Jeanne Jordan migrated east to Boston, where she met her husband Steven Ascher and established a career as a filmmaker, she always stayed closely connected to her family in Iowa. With the farm in danger, Jeanne returns home, and along with her siblings, does what she can to help her parents, Russell and Mary Jane.

One scene in particular stands out in my memory. Steve and Jeanne film an auction in which everything—the farming equipment and household possessions—are sold to raise money to pay back some of the bank loan. It's a very emotional scene, especially the moment when an old neighbor who knew Jeanne as a little girl steps out of the crowd to give her a long hug.

The scene made me think, in an inverted way, of a scene in *Happy Mother's Day* by Richard Leacock, which was filmed almost thirty years earlier in neighboring South Dakota. That documentary describes the effects of sudden fame on the Fischer family, which had been blessed with the birth of quintuplets. The story became a national event—covered relentlessly by the television networks—and the town fathers of Aberdeen, South Dakota, try shamelessly to capitalize on the presence of the quints in their community. There is a parade. There are speeches. And on a designated day, vast quantities of consumer items are donated to the Fischers, the goods spread out in Sardanapalian splendor on the front lawn of their house for the benefit of a *Life* magazine photographer.

While watching the sad farm auction, I couldn't help but reflect on how much America has changed since *Happy Mother's Day* was filmed. The consistent postwar prosperity that America has experienced since the 1950s and 60s on has given way to a persistent, seemingly endless, uncertainty about where the economy is going. The epidemic of farm foreclosures that swept the country in the mid-90s, when *Troublesome Creek* was released, has of course now been replaced by rampant home foreclosures. The film seems a particularly sobering reminder that twenty years later the economy is again wreaking havoc on lower- and middle-income people.

Near the beginning of the film, there is a wonderful scene in which a cat gets stranded in a tree. Various attempts are made to rescue the animal, but suddenly it jumps, or perhaps falls, from the tree—and, being a cat, lands on its feet. *Troublesome Creek* is about a rescue that never really has a chance of succeeding—at least not in the way the Jordans' would have preferred. But the film ends on a cautious note of hope as Jeanne's brother, John, takes a stab at farming a portion of the homestead that has not been sold off. And in a way, one cannot help but feel that the Jordans, too, will be all right.

After thinking about the bittersweet affirmation of family as explored in *Troublesome Creek*, I can't help but return for a moment to my own films. I have always felt that like Jeanne and Steve's film, and for that matter most of the films in this program, my films have depended heavily on the viewer's willingness to accept the profundity of generational continuity—what we owe to our parents and grandparents, and for those of us fortunate enough to have had children, what we owe to our progeny. As an autobiographical documentary filmmaker, I am struggling to accept that this continuity, which has always been so important to me, has been at least partially severed. In my worst moments, the family scenes in my films now seem like

fictions, a kind of lying. Perhaps there never was any real truth behind the scenes, in the sentiments of my films. Perhaps I should add a message at the end of the credits: “Any resemblance between characters portrayed in this film and actual persons is purely coincidental.”

*Time Indefinite*. Even the title now seems ironic. We were married on October 10, 1988, and were unmarried on August 25, 2011. There is no longer anything at all indefinite about the time frame.

Even if I don't screen *Time Indefinite* for myself anytime soon, I involuntarily carry a version of the film around in my head, as I suspect most filmmakers do with their films. At unpredictable moments during the day, or as I am trying to fall asleep at night, something jogs my interior film projector and a scene from the film runs fleetingly across the movie screen in my mind. The soon-to-be wife preparing for the wedding ceremony, putting flowers in her lovely hair, regarding herself in a mirror. The nervous groom placing a wedding ring on the wrong finger of her hand. These scenes now lacerate—shards of a beautiful stained glass window through which someone has thrown a brick

The very ability to feel this powerful a response to images captured with a camera is a ratification of the potency of this kind of documentary. Perhaps unlike any other genre of nonfiction filmmaking, these odd and intimate, yet strangely important, autobiographical films have a rare ability to get at basic emotional truths, pose fundamental questions. They dare to ask not only, as Gauguin did, who we are and where we are going, but they inspire us to examine the ever-changing and mysterious merging of truth and fiction that informs our understanding of our lives, of *what happened*: where we came from, who we were, where we were going. Perhaps for me, the continuity that I have so valued in my life, and in my filmmaking, has not been severed but is merely in need of reconfiguration. Perhaps, as my mother liked to remind me, everything truly does begin and end with family.