

## Part III: The Ethical Space of Documentaries and Religion



## 7. Sensationalized Mormons

A bundle of bicycles lies in front of a house with a porch (fig. 77). The house is filmed from low down, such that the sky takes up almost half the image and seems endless. A warm soundscape accentuates the uncommon imagery that unfolds over the following seconds. A man in a black suit is superimposed. He stands a little to the right of centre, as if leaving space for someone else. As a result of the perspective, his head is above the roof of the house; his arms hang alongside his body and his smile seems shy (fig. 78). This is Michael. In the voice-over we hear him state: “People may ask, is it possible to love three women all at once?” (00:16:02–00:16:05). As the question is posed, two women are superimposed, taking up their positions on either side of the man (fig. 79) and are then joined by a third woman (fig. 80) while Michael continues: “Yes, I can love more than one woman.” Finally, the highly reproductive family, with an impressive 18 children, gathers for the picture, literally made manifest before the camera while Michael Cawley adds: “Genuinely, truly love.” The product of what it is to “genuinely, truly love” is obvious, evidence in support of Michael’s words. In the last shot the mothers are grouped together with their children, whom they present with pride (fig. 81/82).

Michael’s presentation of his family is part of *Meet the Polygamists* (43’), the pilot for the documentary series *Polygamy, USA* (US 2013, six episodes, German title *Polygamie in Gottes Namen*). The narration is styled to introduce not only the Cawleys but also the other families through superimposition, with more members appearing in the picture each time. This method functions to highlight the size of each family. The discussion considers not just what it is like to be part of a huge family but also the legal and emotional difficulties of living polygamously.



Fig. 77 The house of the Cawley family (*Meet the Polygamists*, 00:16:01).



Fig. 78 Cawley the husband says: “People may ask, is it possible to love three women all at once? (*Meet the Polygamists*, 00:16:02–00:16:05)?”



*Fig. 79 Two of Cawley's three wives are superimposed (Meet the Polygamists, 00:16:05).*



*Fig. 80 Michael poses with his three wives: "Yes I can love more than one woman" (Meet the Polygamists, 00:16:10).*



Fig. 81 *The whole Cawley family slowly appears together in the picture (Meet the Polygamists, 00:16:11).*



Fig. 82 *The family name set against a blue sky appears at the end of the presentation, postcard-like (Meet the Polygamists, 00:16:14).*

The narration is focused on polygamous family life, depicting daily routines like preparing and storing food for the numerous family members, cleaning the streets of the community where they live or constructing houses for members of that community. We see family members at their



traditional Thanksgiving football game, where married men play against bachelors. The camera enters the family house, where the wives display their kitchens and bedrooms and explain that their husband spends the night in each of his wives' bedrooms in turn. Religion is front and center in the series. The viewer is given information about the community's religious rituals in the context of everyday practices – the saying of prayers before each meal or at the end of community meetings, attendance at church services on Sundays, and fulfillment of missionary duties. Additionally, the first episode depicts a funeral. These practices are presented through a combination of the informative mode and the sensational mode.

After the Cawley family has been introduced in the narrative, we see them prepare to attend Sunday worship. Wives, husband, and children are framed in close-ups. The women brush and braid their hair. Michael Cawley's vocal intonation may be irritating to the audience, for he speaks with a restraint that seems artificially calm. Many children whirl around him, and his quiet attitude therefore appears unnatural. By contrast the statements made by his wives seem authentic and honest. Plural marriage is cited on several occasions as very hard to imagine and many of the women speak of having to deal with feelings of jealousy. When we then see the community at worship, the faces of some of the leaders are blurred, with a commentary explaining that some individuals wished to remain anonymous because of the risk of prosecution.<sup>518</sup> The musical score emphasizes the legal dangers for the community.

### Ethical questions in the spaces of communication

The church sequence may draw ethical questions from the viewer. Is it morally justifiable to draw attention to a religious community that lives in seclusion? Should religion be presented sensationally? Further, we might wonder what values are communicated in documentaries about this religious community and how these values are shaped audio-visually. We can tackle such questions by examining the content of the documentaries and

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518 Bigamy and polygamy are illegal in the United States, although in several states, including Arizona, polygamy is not always strictly prosecuted. The families call their marriages spiritual and refer to the First Amendment, which covers the free exercise of religion. Andrew March, "Is There a Right to Polygamy? Marriage, Equality and Subsidizing Families in Liberal Public Justification," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 251–253.

in light of the audience's hermeneutic horizons, with their varied implications. Hermeneutic horizons that will be considered in detail further below can be understood as the cultural setting in which the presented values are perceived<sup>519</sup> or in the words of Ralph Potter "the wider context of understanding within which men define and ponder their opinions."<sup>520</sup> Ralph Potter developed four elements of a moral argument of which the wider context is one.

The sequence just recounted, from the episode entitled *Meet the Polygamists*, is produced by Part2 Pictures<sup>521</sup> and was aired on the television channel National Geographic. A dubbed German version of the series was broadcast by the German branch of the National Geographic channel. The six episodes from the docu-series<sup>522</sup> available on Amazon portray several families who are members of the fundamental Mormon polygamist community of Centennial Park, Arizona. The polygamist families continue to practice plural marriage even though The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (LDS) abandoned this practice in 1890 in order that Utah might join the Union.<sup>523</sup> Each episode contains an autonomous storyline and can therefore be understood as an independent documentary narrative. Through the narration, a viewer unfamiliar with Mormon polygamists will learn significant detail about their lifestyle.

At the end of the first episode an intertitle announces the funeral of Aunt Susie, noting (00:40:50), "Centennial Park has never allowed cameras in for a service of this nature until now." Two women close the door of the church and a second intertitle states (00:40:59): "Several leaders asked that their identity be kept confidential." The narration makes evident to the viewer that witnessing this funeral is sensational – a unique opportunity

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519 The hermeneutic horizon further entails religious belongings, education and experiences, values, and moral concepts.

520 Potter, "The Logic of Moral Argument," 108.

521 Part2 Pictures is an indie company and aims to produce high-quality documentaries with, in its own words, "a focus on high-end, human-driven storytelling across a range of genres and platforms." "Part 2 Pictures," Part 2 Pictures, accessed October 11, 2018, <https://www.part2pictures.com/>.

522 Although classified as reality-TV in several databases, the series is taken here as a docu-series because of its dominant narrative style, in which the camera keeps a certain distance from the social actors and the image and the sound design are more elaborated than it is usually the case in reality shows.

523 President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) Wilford Woodruff issued a document that announced that the LDS Church would no longer permit the practice of polygamy. See Shippy, *Mormonism*, 167; Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 2012, 124–151.



and, additionally, the religious community is risking prosecution. The editing, intertitles and camera highlight the privileged access to this religious ritual.

A bird's eye view shows the community in the church. The women are dressed in white; the men wear dark suits and white ties (Fig. 83).



*Fig. 83 The church is full as the sermon is given during the funeral service. The coffin and flowers are on the left side of the image (Meet the Polygamists, 00:42:20).*

Citing scripture, the sermon praises Aunt Susie (00:41:05–00:41:19): “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies! The heart of her husband does safely trust in her. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. All the days of her life.”<sup>524</sup> As we hear the words, crying women are shown wiping their tears or staring into a void. The images are both emotional and intrusive, with close-ups of family members at a very private moment. Whereas the faces of others are blurred. As viewer one feels as intruder into an intimate private circle. The images of the funeral service and of the interment that follows carry both information and emotion. In interviews church members explain what they believe and what death means in their worldview. The emotion-laden sound is engag-

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524 Proverbs 31:10-12, King James Version.

ing and supports the sentiments of the funeral, but it also bolsters the tensions of the film production at a meta level.

In addition to its documentary mode and to the informational and sensational modes already noted, the film has an entertainment mode. The sequence shows an intimate situation in which the social actors agreed to be filmed. Were they aware of these modes of representation, we might wonder, and how seriously did they evaluate the possible consequences of this observation of their lives and its diffusion worldwide? How might we define a morally acceptable depiction of a religious community? These questions are located in the field of media ethics and form the core of this chapter, which considers the ethics of certain documentaries and TV-reporting.<sup>525</sup>

The documentaries examined are between 35 and 90 minutes in length and shed light on Mormons and Mormonism in multifaceted ways. Two main traits can be readily discerned in terms of the space of production. One group of documentaries is affiliated with the LDS; one group is “independent,” in other words not affiliated with any Mormon community. The similarities across the two groups are, however, numerous. Both groups contain documentaries that might be shown on a specific television channel, at a cinema, at a film festival or on a streaming platform. The narrative of the films are communicated in documentary, informational, and sensational modes. With the documentaries’ spaces of communication and further reading modes established, we can turn to discuss the films individually and in comparison with other documentaries from the same group. The ethical questions are considered in light of each documentary’s spaces of communication and reading modes, with a focus on the production space and how it affects the ethical implications.

The chapter starts with a theoretical perspective that considers ethical questions and their systematization in the context of documentary media and its spaces of communication. In a second step the documentary media are analyzed by category, looking specifically at the hermeneutic horizons of the social actors, the filmmakers, and the audience – for each instance within in the spaces of production, representation, circulation/distribution, and consumption – the allegiances of each party, the gaze of the camera, and the production context.

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525 Documentaries and TV-reports differ according to their spaces of distribution and consumption. Whereas documentaries are often shown at festivals and in cinema, TV-reports, as the name indicates, are mostly produced by television companies and aired on television.